

GSM 21/7/12

Matthew 13:31-33

We began a series last week looking at Jesus's teaching about the 'kingdom of God'. Before we unpack these two parables I want to speak a little about what a "kingdom" means, and in particular what the kingdom of God means. It's a phrase that is often used in the Bible and that we use maybe sometimes without properly thinking through what the concept means. The theologian George Ladd said this: "The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is exercised." In English, that means that the kingdom of God is a phrase used in the Bible to describe God's authority, and his exercise of that authority. To have a kingdom means that there is a king that is in charge and also a territory or people that are subject to the rule and protection of the king. It has a meaning much wider than how we might use it today to describe an actual country such as the United Kingdom. If you travel a few miles east you will come to the kingdom of the Olympic Committee of the London 2012 games, who will place some conditions on you entering their territory, such as dictating what brands of clothing you can wear or what food you can eat. If you go home then you are entering your own kingdom where you can dictate who comes into your house or flat and, to a certain extent how they behave there. One of the reasons that people feel so violated when someone breaks into their house even if nothing is taken is because your rule has been threatened – someone has come into your kingdom with evil intent and has challenged your kingly rule. Now of course your kingdom stops at your garden gate, and the kingdom of the 2012 Olympic Committee stops at the gates of the Olympic venues. The kingdom of God is both easier and harder to define than that, but the concept is the same – it means the rule and God and the territory or people that are under his rule and protection.

In these parables Jesus explains various things about God's kingdom. What we see from this very well-known parable of the mustard seed and the slightly less well-known parable of the yeast are three things: God's kingdom:-

- Starts small and becomes big;
- Is hidden, but ends up transforming its surroundings

- Is now but not yet.

Let's take these in turn.

First, God's kingdom is small but ends up big. Have a look at verse 32: "though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree". I bought these mustard seeds last weekend. I'll try to pick one seed up – it's hard. Not sure if you can see it – I'm also not sure whether these are the same sorts of seeds that would have been around in Jesus's time but these were the only mustard seeds that Sainsburys had. But the point is this – it's very small. If you were going to use it to flavour your cooking you would probably need quite a few for it to make any sort of taste impact. One wouldn't go very far – it's way too small. But it has a power within it, and power to grow. It ends up as large as a tree.

What does this mean in the context of the kingdom of God? How does that start small and grow big? Why did Jesus not liken it to something that starts big and stays big? Well, it's the pattern of the Bible, isn't it, that God chooses to work through small things to do big things. Think of the Bible stories in the Old Testament – God does not choose strong people but weak people. Think of the Israelites. Here is a refugee people who leave the oppressing environment of Egypt and wander in the wilderness for forty years, vulnerable and homeless. And this ragged bunch is who God chooses as a people to bear his name. Think of the New Testament – Jesus did not surround himself with great strategic thinkers, men of great courage or military experts. His disciples were common people from a variety of backgrounds, they were often bemused by what he said and they deserted him in his hour of need. Yet on these people God built his church which stretches across the globe today. It says in the Bible that the reason that God does this is so that people can see that it is God who has the power, not people acting according to their own strength of numbers or skills or power. This is what it says in 1 Corinthians 1:28 and 29: "[God] chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are **so that no-one may boast before him**". You see, the fact that God achieves mighty things through small things points towards the king and his power.

God's kingdom starts small and becomes big. Secondly, God's kingdom is hidden, but ends up transforming its surroundings. If you plant a mustard seed, you will not see anything happen for a while. You can't see the mustard seed any more – it's in the ground. It's not like planting a sapling, where you can see it. You have to wait for anything to be revealed. Similarly with the yeast in a batch of dough – it's not like adding icing to something where it is very clear what has been added. No, you need to wait to see the effects of the yeast doing its work. Now, for a coming kingdom, this 'hiddenness' is very odd. Most kingdoms announce themselves with great fanfare or violence. Think of the beginning of the film *Gladiator*. The first scenes show of the coming of Caesar's rule to the Northern Germanic area. It is most definitely not hidden – it comes with great violence – as Russell Crowe famously says to his troops at the beginning of the film – “at my command, unleash hell”. That was how kingdoms came – they came through violent conquest of other kingdoms, and there was no mistaking or ignoring it. As Paul reminded us last week, that was also the earnest hope of many Jews at the time of Jesus – that the new king would come who would overthrow the rule of the Romans, through military or miraculous means or a mixture of the two. To counter this, this is what Jesus said to the Pharisees in Luke 17: “Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say ‘Here it is’ or ‘There it is’, because the kingdom of God is within you”. This told the Pharisees that the kingdom that Jesus was announcing was very different from the one expected to be brought in by the Messiah. This kingdom was not a physical one, but a spiritual one. It comes not with great fanfare or violence, but with a conversation, a book read, a talk heard, a seed sown. It's not dramatic, and it's usually unseen. The celebration and festivities in the countryside historically have not come at the time of planting, but at the time of harvesting.

But although it is hidden, it ends up transforming its surroundings. The mustard seed grows into something so big that it offers shelter to the birds. The yeast causes the dough to rise and completely changes the nature of the bread. How does the kingdom of God transform its surroundings? Well, a number of answers to that. Firstly, if the kingdom of God is within, the God's kingdom transforms the character of those that are part of the kingdom. For those of you who follow Jesus and have been for a while, consider this – think of what you were before you decided to follow Jesus, and think of what you are like now. Have your attitudes changed to anything? Have your attitudes to your money changed? Have your attitudes to

your work and ambition changes? Have your attitudes to your family changed? I would imagine that for most of us who follow Jesus we will be able to point to various things where our attitudes to a number of things have utterly changed since we decided to follow Jesus. Now a part of that change, for sure, is because we are instructed by the Bible to change our attitudes and behaviours, but a large part of that change is because of the transforming power of God's kingdom inside us. One of the things about being a Christian is that you find yourself dancing to a different tune from the rest of society. I look at my work colleagues who are constantly striving for more money, more advancement, who are sacrificing their family relationships in order to succeed more, with a level of incomprehension. I am absolutely not a poster boy for good Christian attitudes, but I believe that how I think about the crucial issues of work, money and ambition has been and is being transformed, little by little, sometimes in big steps, sometimes at the speed of a snail, almost without me knowing. The Holy Spirit inside me makes me see things in a different way to how I would if I was not a Christian.

But also, there's a reference here in the parable to the kingdom of God offering shelter to the birds of the air, and there's a sense that we can expect to see a transforming effect not only in the lives of Christians but also in the society in which they live. Our role as followers of Jesus is to work for the spiritual good of the society in which we live, by witnessing to God's power, but also for the practical good of the society in which we live. The important work that is done at the Teen Challenge services and the night shelter is not just the proclamation of the gospel, but in the feeding, clothing and providing shelter. These things are not just the pretext to give us the right to speak about Jesus – they are important in and of themselves. The transforming work of the gospel is not limited to the lives of the followers of Jesus – it extends to the environment in which they live. The yeast does not just change itself, but it changes the dough into which it is mixed. In Jeremiah 29 God says this to the Israelite exiles – “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile”. This notion of peace and prosperity – the notion of “shalom”, or wholeness – is something that we still are called to bring to London or wherever else we live.

Finally, the kingdom is now, but not yet. This is an odd concept which Paul referred to last time. If you plant a mustard seed in the ground then, with the right growing conditions, it

will surely grow into a large mustard plant. It is there in the ground. Its future is as a large mustard plant. But the mustard plant is not there yet. If you mix yeast into dough then it is there and, given warmth and left alone, it will do its work. But you don't have bread until it does its work. Think back to 6th July 2005. The announcement was made that London would host the 2012 Olympic Games. London's identity changed overnight into the host city for these games. But the games had not yet arrived. Much still needed to be done.

The Bible speaks of God's kingdom as something which is both here now and yet to come. There's one chapter in the New Testament, in Luke, when Jesus firstly teaches us how to pray and say "your kingdom come" and then says "if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God *has come* upon you". So, pray for God's kingdom to come, when it has already come. Confusing. But it's like the mustard seed – God's kingdom has come in that it is a present reality, but there is also a future reality.

This concept of now and not yet is a common one in the gospel. Those who follow Jesus have a new identity. We are what the Bible calls a new creation. But the consequences of that – the fulfilment of that – is not for now, but for when Jesus returns. The Bible uses an interesting picture here – it talks of the church, the body of those who follow Jesus as being promised in marriage. Just as a married couple spend some time engaged and arguing about table decorations, before the marriage is finalised and consummated, so those who follow Jesus have to wait until Jesus's return before their identity as what the church calls the bride of Christ is fulfilled. There is a future reality and a present reality. But they're different. We have a glorious future, which is certain – but a present in which to work out the consequences of that future.

So, God's kingdom starts small and becomes big; is hidden, but ends up transforming its surroundings; and is now but not yet. How does that affect our lives – how can we apply this teaching? Well, let me give you a confession. I have been attending church ever since I was born, and the Sunday school way of teaching the New Testament which I've experienced is to see the Jews generally at that time as being stupid. And I took on that attitude. How could they not realise that Jesus was not going to overthrow the Romans? Why did they have such

a problem with a Messiah dying on a cross? But long ago I've realised that I probably generally react to life in much the same way as the Jews did then when faced with situations of difficulty. My prayers become "God release your power in a mighty way to solve this situation". It's not so different from the Jews longing for a Messiah to kick out the Romans. The thing is, when I pray for God to work in mighty power, I don't have in mind the mighty power that causes the growth of a mustard seed, or the mighty transforming power of yeast in bread. What I have in mind is something miraculous and spectacular – a short cut, if you like. Something out of the blue. But it's interesting that in these parables Jesus is saying that the pattern of the gospel is far more organic and gradual than that. The way of God is that we are more likely to experience the power of the mustard seed growth than, if you like, having a fully grown mustard plant magicked out of thin air. We are more likely to experience the gradual transformation brought about by yeast in a batch of dough than that of someone suddenly waving a wand and bread appearing. God's kingdom starts small, hidden and awaiting something in the future. It does not quickly move to something big, transforming and capturing the future reality. Just as the farmer has to wait for the seasons to change before the harvest comes, so God will ask us more often than not to wait for the seasons of our life to change before we see the growth or the transformation. To use a phrase, we often have to sow in tears.

So here's my question for us this morning. Are we happy with that or is our minds set on something other than God's pattern for our lives? Are we willing to wait for growth, for transformation and our future glory or do we want it *now*? Do we consider that our timing is better than God's? I don't know if you feel sometimes like a seed buried in the ground with lots of slimy worms slithering around you, wondering if you'll ever see the sunlight, but unaware that all the while there is a mighty power inside you that will transform you and your surroundings? It's hard when you're buried underground to have that vision. But that's what we're called to.

How can we do it? By thinking on the one who didn't start big, as a conquering king, but small, as a child born in a feeding trough. His arrival wasn't as one shining with God's glory who no-one could mistake – instead he was hidden. As it says in Isaiah, "he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." And before he could get to glory, he had to suffer the most hideous death and separation from God that has ever been or will ever be. If you do sense this morning that you're buried under

ground then you are not buried as deep as Jesus was on the cross. If you feel small and hidden away, then imagine what the mighty son of God felt in coming to the earth in the way he did. If you feel pointless and hopeless, then look at what Jesus did for you and achieved for you and understand the certainty of his promises, because of what he has done. You are not pointless, and there is hope for the follower of Jesus in the most desperate circumstances. Even if all you can see at time are the worms.

God's kingdom is now but not yet. Jesus was always the saviour of the world, but had to go through emptying himself of his glory and, because of his obedience, torture and death on a cross. *Because* of this – not despite this, *because* of this degradation and humbling and suffering, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. Do you see how this pattern works? There is a planting before there is the tree, there is a hiding before there is the transformation, there is a waiting before there is a glory. The planting, the hiding, the waiting does not get in the way of the transformation, the growth and the glory – instead they are woven into it. The gospel pattern is of waiting, of suffering, of self-denial – why? Because through Jesus's waiting, suffering and self-denial we know that the mustard seed will grow into a tree, that the yeast will transform the dough, and that we will be welcomed into the presence of God for all time.

Are we prepared to be planted like a seed and mixed in like yeast? Are we prepared to wait for the growth and transformation? That's the gospel pattern. That's the path that Jesus took and that's the reason that we know that one day the 'not yet' will become the 'now'.