

“The kingdom of Heaven is like”

May I speak and may we all hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy spirit.
Amen.

I'd like to invite you, if you will, to come back to the first century for a moment and enter in your imaginations into our gospel reading. We're in the middle of a great crowd, craning our necks and straining our ears so as not to miss anything that falls from the lips of this amazing man, Jesus of Nazareth, son of a humble carpenter but the most compelling preacher we've ever heard. He's talking again about the coming of God's kingdom. Our religious leaders talk often about it. They say it's coming soon but it doesn't sound much different for the likes of us. Rome might fall but there's no talk of justice and freedom for ordinary folk. This Jesus is so different from the usual rabbis. He even touches lepers! What is he saying now? The kingdom of heaven is like yeast? Mustard seeds? Treasure and pearls? What can he mean?

(pause)

And Now

Let's return and think about all this with our twenty first century hindsight.

The biblical prophets had constantly spoken of God's coming kingdom **not** in terms of worldly power but of the power of divine love, mercy and justice, peace and freedom for all his people--- a kingdom where God's throne is in every human heart willingly surrendered to him. This is the kingdom Jesus is trying to help people to understand, and to desire in the deepest places of their beings. This kingdom is what we're praying for when we say, as Jesus himself taught us: “Your kingdom come”.

Two thousand years later we're still living in the great kingdom paradox- - “the now and the not yet” as it's sometimes described.

The day of the kingdom has dawned with the coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection, but it's not yet complete.

Last week Mike was talking about the parable of the wheat and the weeds growing up together- -their roots all intertwined- -about having to wait patiently in hope and in trust for the final sifting and purifying at harvest time.

The parable of the yeast is about patience too. I used to make bread with my kids when they were little. They loved it, except for the waiting bit. I had to find plenty to keep them busy while the dough took what seemed to them an impossibly long time to rise, mysteriously, in the airing cupboard. The coming of the kingdom requires patience while a very gradual but

miraculous transformation takes place. This is caused by something apparently small and insignificant but with great hidden power. Our translation says the woman **mixed** the yeast, but some translations say **hid**- -she “hid” the yeast in the flour. And by the way, the amount Jesus is talking about is crazy! That much flour would provide bread for about 160 people! The mysterious transformation is so gradual you can hardly see it happening, but the end results will be spectacular.

The parable of the mustard seed is making the same two points. Something very small is hidden, this time in the ground. Then comes the wait.

The mustard seed was the smallest seed known to first century farmers and on the shores of lake Galilee it could grow to about ten feet high, and even provide nesting places for the birds.

Yes, with the coming of Jesus the kingdom had actually broken in but it was largely hidden. Only those who were humble enough to look and to listen with open hearts and minds could see it. Two thousand years later his teaching has spread over the whole world. Don't you find that amazing when you think of its small, unpromising beginnings? Hearts and lives have been and are being transformed, sometimes with spectacular effects and sometimes known only to God and perhaps a few individuals. BUT: the enemy is obviously still at work. Our task is still to share the love of God, living out as best we can the values of his kingdom, and wait.

Now what about the treasure and the pearls? Jesus's first century listeners didn't have banks so it was common practice to hide valuables in the ground. What's more, they would have known that it was perfectly legal to lay claim to anything you found in a piece of land you'd bought. The pearl divers made their living by their finds and the pearl merchants were always on the lookout for bigger and more perfect pearls. So here Jesus is saying that the kingdom is like finding a great hoard of treasure or a priceless pearl. It's yours for the taking, as long as you're prepared to give up everything else in order to have it. All you have to do is recognise the treasure, desire it passionately and be absolutely committed to making it the centre of your life. That's all!

It will bring you tremendous joy but it may involve great sacrifice. It's for every individual to think and pray through what it means to put God at the centre of our lives. For the disciples it meant leaving homes and jobs but there were others just as committed who were expected to stay at home. Think for example, of the man who was cured of his madness. When he wanted to follow Jesus he was told to go home and tell his neighbours what God had done for him. Jesus wasn't rejecting him. He was just giving him a different job in the spreading of the good news of the kingdom of God's all embracing love.

I've been asking myself this week, “How much do I desire God's loving rule in my own heart, in my own life? Do I want it more than anything else?” I think the honest answer is: “I want to want it more than anything else and sometimes I know I do, but I can easily lose that keen perspective; the vision can become blurred. The enemy gets to work and I don't notice for a while. Then something happens to bring me back. This week it was having to

prepare this sermon. Whether the result has helped you I don't know, I can only hope so, but it's certainly helped me.

Our daily lives in July 2020 may look very different from those of the first century but our deepest needs and longings remain exactly the same, above all our need for love, meaning and hope. In our second reading from Paul's letter to the persecuted church in Rome he writes these astonishing words: "All things work together for good to those who love God".

Er, excuse me Paul. All things? Even covid 19? YES, ALL THINGS!

This pandemic has jolted us all **out of** our usual routines of action and thought and it's jolted many people **into** looking for fresh hope and meaning. I was astonished to read that since all our places of worship have been forced to close and we've been working to reach out online, thousands more people have been tuning in than usually attend on a Sunday. Thousands more have actually been googling the name of Jesus. They are searching. They're only dipping a toe in the water, but it's a start. Of course it's no substitute for person to person encounter but it's a great outreach tool and we must find new ways to build on it.

At the moment people are more open. We've got to know our neighbours better. So many people are realising their dependence on one another and there's so much opportunity for mutual kindness and compassion.

Many terrible things happened to Paul too, but he saw them all, including being thrown into prison, as opportunities to share the good news of God's all embracing love shown supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I'd like to conclude with Paul's often quoted words from the end of our second reading and add a slight twenty first century tweak:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things past nor things to come, nor height nor depth **nor this present pandemic** nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". Amen.