

**Proper 11—17<sup>th</sup> June, 2018**

**1 Samuel 15:34-16:3; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34**

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“Mmm, is this trifle ever good!” she enthused. “Glad you like it—I must have tipped half a bottle of sherry into it, but have you tried this yet? It’s scrummy, positively sinful”. “You know my secret?” she confided, “soaking the fruit in Triple Sec”. Don’t you love potlucks? —grazing on goodies, tasting everyone’s best tried-and-tested dish, and taking your favourite to the party.

Parables are a bit like potlucks providing a smorgasbord of possibilities besides our own tried-and-tested interpretations. Take the two in today’s Gospel—concerning the Kingdom of God. I don’t know what you make of them, but chances are we all have different opinions and whenever we come to them fresh, we can often see something new—as Jesus probably intended. Some things are so great, so amazing we only glimpse the part our experiences or imagination allow, but as we grow our appreciation and understanding, like our tastes change. Just as light reflects different facets of a gemstone, parables of the Kingdom highlight a spectrum of truth as we turn them over in our minds.

In *Godly Play*, we ask *wondering questions* like:

--I wonder what the seeds really are?

--I wonder who the sower is?

--I wonder what the ground was doing when the sower was asleep?

--I wonder what the harvest refers to?

--I wonder what part of the story is about you?

We never agree nor disagree with the responses, but simply playback what the children say so they know their opinion is heard and valued. If Sunday School had been like that when I was young, it may not have taken so long to reject some of the judgemental explanations we were taught. Back then the parables were approached like equations, with this equals this, and that equals that—riddle solved even if it didn’t make sense or sound like Good News for everybody which was puzzling, given how loving and forgiving Js was.

Centuries of interpretation adapted the meaning to serve changing needs, speaking to different people in different situations, yet each time offering just one way of looking at the story. For example, sometimes the harvest was regarded as the Day of Judgement, so the bottom line was: *be good or else you’ll be thrown on the rubbish heap with the weeds, or worse—burn*. You can see how that scare tactic might have worked sometimes. Yet in today’s two parables, there is no mention of weeds or threat of fire, but sheer wonder at the mysterious way seeds grow until they mature—either to be fruitful and gathered in or become a big bush where birds can make their nests. What does this say about the Kingdom of God? What might the Spirit be saying to the Church in this day and age when science has solved the mystery about how plants develop, and far from remaining passive or sleeping, farmers practice crop-rotation, or pre-condition the soil, add fertilizers, use pesticides and even genetically-modified seeds to ensure a good crop, leaving climate as the only wildcard we cannot seem to control.

Science and statistics condition so much of our thinking—mystery seems almost a dirty word, an excuse for ignorance. We want answers we can rely on, not riddles. So, what is the right answer, the key to the Kingdom? Near the end of the C19<sup>th</sup>, life began to be getting better for many people, so given the prevailing optimism, biblical scholars applied statistics to project church growth as an upwardly trending straight-line graph. Back then, the main message from today's parables was a joyful challenge for growing congregations to provide more social services to help and protect the poor. With the seed of the Gospel securely planted in society signs of the *kingdom-come* glowed on the horizon. Sadly, it didn't pan out like that. Faced with the horrors of war, then the struggle to rebuild broken lives, many people blamed God or asked where God was in all that mess—asleep, like in the story? Forced to look for another explanation that still reflected the positive message of the parables the faithful discovered that the Kingdom comes whenever the tiniest seed of goodness is planted then able to produce fruit—so we carried on and trusted in God.

You get the picture without my offering further variations on the theme. Instead, let me share what modern interpreters teach us for you to decide what the parables are saying to you. The key is an unusual twist, a reversal or wild exaggeration Jesus used intended to grab our interest. In our C21<sup>st</sup> urban setting the clue to our understanding will be different from what rural folk in Galilee 2000 years ago found surprising, but Jesus said these parables focus on the Kingdom of God—however we define or think of it. Is it a place, a state of mind or being, something we will only reach in the future, or is it within us, surrounding us, calling us to enter it right now, or is it all the above and so much more—the place where we find peace, the unfolding of peace and justice—another name for universal love? It must have an element of mystery, or Jesus would have been more specific. With *satnav*, we might prefer a set of coordinates we could punch into a handy dandy device, but we don't need gizmos or gimmicks to locate the Kingdom of God—we are *that close*, because “it's come near” said Jesus.

So where do the seeds fit in? What is it that, once sown can be left to grow, hidden a while in the ground, yet when the time's right proves fruitful? What can be so small that once planted is capable of developing into something worthwhile and worth gathering? Still stumped? Well, we can always turn to the other readings for clues. They suggest things are not always what they seem. God sees differently from us, urging Samuel to forget Saul who had run amok as Israel's first king and look outside the palace and prevailing power structure for a replacement. Similarly, Paul tells the Corinthians to stop looking at things from a human point of view but try to see things God's way. If that means we start to see things differently, seeing others so differently through the eyes of love, then everything will be new, and we will be a new creation. That impact on what we think, say and do, could be so profound, it would be like stepping into a whole new realm, new reality.

Is that the answer—a new mindset or change of heart that starts small, but can grow into a place where God's will is done? In terms of seeing things differently, did you notice that in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus chose something that grew into a bush, not a huge tree? How strange given that trees had normally functioned as symbols of knowledge and life. Changing this symbol for God's Kingdom to a mere bush is a big surprise, maybe the key, saying greatness is not measured by human standards but by the way it is manifest—protecting and providing a

place for the birds to make their nests. I wonder what the bush really is, or the seeds, or the ground? I wonder who the birds are? I wonder where you are in story? There's something to chew on!