



**Parables of Hope**  
**30 July 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**

*Romans 8:26-39*

*Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52*

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I've been experimenting this week with a bird feeder which I've hung on my big tree out the front of my bedroom. If I stand on my little balcony, I can just reach a branch of the tree to hang the bird feeder on, which is sufficiently out of reach I hope of the neighbourhood cats! I was intrigued how the sparrows took a couple of days to check out the feeder of seed. They flew round it and then they started knocking it as they flew past so that some of the seed fell out the sides and down onto the ground. Then they weren't quite so bright for they flocked down to pick the seed up off the ground, which could have been cat heaven if they were quicker! But finally the birds' trust grew so that they started landing on the feeder and its perches and they very quickly emptied out the feeder so that I've had to fill it again already. Hopefully this will help them to get through the challenging winter weather and make it through to the hope of spring.

I love the string of parables portrayed in our Gospel today. The kingdom of heaven is like...a mustard seed that grows into a tree for birds to nest in, like yeast in bread, like hidden treasure in a field or a pearl of great value, like a bumper haul of fish. Perhaps I enjoy the imagery that takes me back in my imagination to the shore of the sea of Galilee with the fertile hillsides and land around it. I can imagine the people listening to the stories and nodding at the familiar images Jesus uses.

What is Jesus saying about the kingdom of heaven, and about the God whose kingdom it is? Jesus is sharing his experience of God as incredibly prodigally unlimitedly – even wastefully – generous and good<sup>1</sup>. Our creator God is the one whose great gift to us is Life, an ever-renewed giving that invites a response of thanksgiving from us, but also invites us to in turn be generous to one another and to our world. As Paul puts it to the Romans, "God who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him give us everything else? (Rom. 8:32). God is the God of extravagant generosity and Jesus is the gift of gifts – God in the flesh for us, God made present in the words and actions of Jesus, God who gives himself in Christ in ultimate self-giving for our salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Revd Dr Raymond Pelly, 'The Kingdom is like...', Wellington Cathedral of St Paul, July 24 2011

We can see how many of the people of Jesus' time lapped up this good news of the kingdom of heaven, particularly as we know they lived under the rule of another kingdom. Matthew uses the same word *Basileia* for both the kingdom of heaven, but also the Roman Empire, the rule under which the people of Galilee found themselves. So the lived reality for many was that they were peasant farmers, with a family to support, the worry about whether there would be seed for next year's crop, the reality of rent, tithes, tolls and taxes to pay. And if the crop failed, then there would be the burden of borrowed money, going into debt, possible loan default and the risk of land loss and the real possibility of virtual slavery as a day labourer<sup>2</sup>.

You can see the appeal then of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of heaven, where God's rule is just, where the cycle of poverty is broken and abundance is promised for all.

What is offered in the kingdom of heaven is hope and promise for the future, based on the character of God who pours out gifts abundantly through creation. And yet what is not offered in this world is perfection – this is still a world in which at times crops fail, and there are weeds and birds and rocks and scorching sun as we recall from the parable of the sower.

While the kingdom of God is offered freely, there are choices to make for those who encounter it. Like the sorting of the bad fish from the good fish, there are choices to be made or rejected, new paths to be taken or not taken. The kingdom of God disturbs the way things are, it is not for the self-satisfied, those who've got their nest well-lined and are happy with their creature comforts. Rather the kingdom calls us to examine our priorities, to embark on a way of living which conflicts with and challenges many of the world's ways of operating. We are called to live into the kingdom, to live the changes we want to see in the world.

Joachim Jeremias in his seminal book "The Parables of Jesus" offers a way of looking at the parable of the mustard seed which perhaps puts the finger on a gap between what our reading of it today might be, in contrast to those who heard it originally. He observes that a modern person "passing through the ploughed field, thinks of what is going on beneath the soil, and envisages a biological development. The people of the Bible, passing through the same plough-land, look up and see miracle upon miracle, nothing less than resurrection from the dead."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Kathleen Rushton, RSM, 'Matthew 13 – parables of eschatological and ecological hope', *Tui Motu*, July 2011, 26-27

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM, 1972 quoted by Bp Martin Warner, *Church Times*, 22 July 2011

The difference he sees is that we in our time focus on our knowledge of the biological processes that are going on, we think we understand what happens to make a mustard seed grow into a tree and that this is what is important. The people of Jesus' time didn't have access to this knowledge, but therefore they were more open to perceive the meaning of what was happening – in the mustard seed becoming a tree they say miracle, they saw resurrection, new life, new hope, promise of new creation.

The danger now is that we prioritise knowledge over meaning. It was T S Eliot<sup>4</sup> who asked some questions in the 1930s that are even more pertinent today: Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? Where is the Life that we have lost in living?

For those in our world who have successfully achieved widespread control of material goods, the question whether we have achieved value and meaning can remain unanswered. We may have many fields or many pearls, but what of the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price? And at what cost do we have our fields or pearls, or phones or coffee or chocolate, if other humans or creatures in our world are enslaved or lose their habitat or fresh water? Knowledge and information can only take us so far, when we are brought up short as to how we live in this world with such a superabundance of knowledge and communication of information, but yet it seems so little wisdom about how we can live well within our means, and in a way that brings life and promise to those with whom we share our world, and indeed the planet itself, this earth our home.

The New Testament scholar C H Dodd described a parable as this: the presentation of a vivid or strange image that leaves the mind “in sufficient doubt of its precise application to tease it into active thought”<sup>5</sup>. May our minds be ‘teased into active thought’ as we consider the pictures given today of the kingdom of heaven, and as we explore the treasure of what is old and new within the values of God's reign. What is there which is timeless, which transcends time and is of value to us today as we seek to find meaning and hope in our world of so much information, and so little wisdom? Yes we acknowledge that ultimately we explore a mystery that can never be fully fathomed, but this is the delight, the teasing nature, the lure that leads us on into discovering the riches of the abundance of life in the kingdom of God. May we live into its hope and promise, today and always. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> T S Eliot, Chorus from *The Rock*, 1934, quoted by Bp Martin Warner, Church Times, 22 July 2011

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 5, quoted by Bp Martin Warner, Church Times, 22 July 2011