

PARABLES OF MUSTARD SEED, LEAVEN ETC

Canon Jamie MacLeod is a vicar who helps run an ecumenical retreat centre in the Peak District.

Some years ago he went looking for an impressive looking picture to hang on one of the walls of his house and went into an antiques shop in Cheshire where he came across what looked like an artist's copy of a Van Dyck painting. He bought the painting for £400.

When the BBC's Antique Roadshow was in Nottingham some time later he took the painting along to find out who the copying artist might have been.

The Roadshow team got very excited and called in an expert on Van Dyck's paintings, and lo and behold, the picture of a Venetian judge which he had purchased for £400 was the genuine article and valued at £400,000 – the highest valuation of a painting on the Antiques Roadshow up to that time.

As we listened to the 5 quick fire parables of today's Gospel you could imagine Jesus using that incident as an example of the kingdom of God! A kingdom of surprises where the unexpected happens, where the world's values are thrown upside down, where the small become great, the ordinary become extraordinary, where what seems to be mundane is actually marvellous and what seems of little value turns out to be of great worth.

There's such a variety of metaphors in today's Gospel – there's the mustard seed, small and nothing to look at, but what a tree it produces – where the birds can roost and build their nests.

There's the yeast – the little bit of dough left over from the previous day's baking that turns the stodgy dough into a light and tasty bread that is good to eat.

There's the fortunate find of treasure hidden in a field; the Antiques Roadshow like find of a precious pearl amongst ordinary stones. And the abundant catch of all kinds of fish which nearly breaks the net. There's surprise, there's growth and there's transformation.

And Jesus says that's what happens when people – when WE – begin to take God seriously and seek to do his will in the world, in the community and in the streets where we live.

That's what the kingdom of God is all about – it's not a special place, it's certainly not contained in the church, rather the kingdom is wherever and whenever and by whoever God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

And as these short parables indicate, God's will is done in a number of ordinary and surprising ways by a number of ordinary and surprising people.

People like the mustard seed, reputedly the smallest and least significant of seeds. Yet when allowed to grow and flourish attracts birds from everywhere who love to feed on its little black seeds. All from a single mustard seed.

There's a song about The POWER OF ONE which goes:-

“If I need a friend, would you take my hand?
Would you turn away or would you take a stand?
It all starts with one voice breaking through
And before you know the crowd will grow
And stand with you.
You can change the world by the power of one”

A reformation can begin with one person – as we remember the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther this year. In God's kingdom everyone and everything we do is used, even if we think it is only the size of a mustard seed. Remember the power of one.

In the 2nd parable yeast or leaven is about transformation. Transforming the unappetising lump of dough into sweet smelling fresh and tasty bread.

Sometimes life is boring – though not, I've noticed in St. Peter's! Sometimes what we do is mundane and humdrum and doesn't seem to matter much. But when our lives and what we do are offered to God, when he lives in us and we in him, even the ordinary becomes purposeful, even the mundane becomes marvellous.

One of my favourite hymns is Teach me, My God and King by George Herbert. In it he writes of the difference of when we do something “for thy sake”, and then he says,

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws
Makes that and the action fine.

In God's kingdom the ordinary becomes the extraordinary and we are inwardly transformed.

The famous mystic, Brother Lawrence, who spent a lot of his time in the monastery kitchen among dirty dishes once said, “I feel Jesus as close to me in the kitchen as I do in Holy Communion.”

And then in Jesus' day the most common way of keeping your valuables safe was by digging a hole in the ground to put them in. And that was pretty widespread for hundreds of years as still today, all over the world, hidden treasure troves are, literally, been unearthed.

A few years ago the largest haul of Anglo-Saxon treasure was found buried in a field in Staffordshire. The same thing happened in Lichfield where a hoard of 3500 ancient items were found in a local farmer's field.

Sometimes we think that God can only be found in sacred spaces like churches and cathedrals, and many of them do have an almost tangible sense of the other-worldly. A place where people have worshipped for generations.

But God is also to be found in the ordinary and the mundane, sometimes right there under our feet or before our eyes like treasure trove or a glittering pearl among glass baubles.

As one writer put it, "The kingdom of heaven is not in some exotic place marked with an X, like in those elusive maps of adventure stories. Rather that X marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people, places and activities of our lives." And she went on to say, "If you want to speak of heavenly things, like Jesus, start with earthly things." (Barbara Brown Taylor in *The Seeds of Heaven*)

Where is the kingdom of God to be found? In acts of friendship and kindness, in donations to the Foodbanks, in provision for refugees, in contact with the lonely and those who can't get out. In short, the kingdom is wherever and whenever some service is done and by whoever.

And each of us, by who we are and by what we do and how we speak to others, is called to be an X where God's kingdom of love is to be seen.

And lastly, that wonderful catch of fish.

Rowan Williams' father-in-law, Geoffrey Paul, a former bishop of Bradford once said, "There is no way of belonging to Christ except by belonging gladly and irrevocably to the glorious ragbag of saints and fatheads that make up the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church!"

Yes, we'll be surprised at who is in God's kingdom, and no doubt they in turn may be surprised to see us there too.

But God is the Judge, not us, and his arms are wide enough and strong enough to give every one of us our chance. God has no immigration targets to meet. Builds no walls. With God, the more the merrier.

Back to the Antiques Roadshow and Jamie MacLeod: each of us, however ordinary and however unlikely, is original and the genuine article, of great value to God and with great potential to make his kingdom come wherever and whoever we are.