

7th Sunday after Pentecost – 16 July 2023

Isaiah 6:8-13

8 Then I heard the Lord say, "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?" I answered, "I will go! Send me!" 9 So he told me to go and give the people this message: "No matter how much you listen, you will not understand. No matter how much you look, you will not know what is happening." 10 Then he said to me, "Make the minds of these people dull, their ears deaf, and their eyes blind, so that they cannot see or hear or understand. If they did, they might turn to me and be healed." 11 I asked, "How long will it be like this, Lord?" He answered, "Until the cities are ruined and empty - until the houses are uninhabited - until the land itself is a desolate wasteland. 12 I will send the people far away and make the whole land desolate. 13 Even if one person out of ten remains in the land, he too will be destroyed; he will be like the stump of an oak tree that has been cut down." (The stump represents a new beginning for God's people.)

Matthew 13:10-17, 31-35

10 Then the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, "Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?" 11 Jesus answered, "The knowledge about the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 For the person who has something will be given more, so that he will have more than enough; but the person who has nothing will have taken away from him even the little he has. 13 The reason I use parables in talking to them is that they look, but do not see, and they listen, but do not hear or understand. 14 So the prophecy of Isaiah applies to them: 'This people will listen and listen, but not understand; they will look and look, but not see, 15 because their minds are dull, and they have stopped up their ears and have closed their eyes. Otherwise, their eyes would see, their ears would hear, their minds would understand, and they would turn to me, says God, and I would heal them.' 16 'As for you, how fortunate you are! Your eyes see and your ears hear. 17 I assure you that many prophets and many of God's people wanted very much to see what you see, but they could not, and to hear what you hear, but they did not. ... 31 Jesus told them another parable: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. 32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.' 33 Jesus told them still another parable: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with a bushel of flour until the whole batch of dough rises.' 34 Jesus used parables to tell all these things to the crowds; he would not say a thing to them without using a parable. 35 He did this to make come true what the prophet had said, 'I will use parables when I speak to them; I will tell them things unknown since the creation of the world.'"

Focus: The kingdom of heaven (1): From little things, big things grow.

Function: Help listeners understand that faith is essential for us to receive and share God's kingdom as revealed by Jesus.

Matthew 13 is a long chapter full of parables, in fact, eight parables in total. Interestingly, except the first and the last, all these parables begin with "The kingdom of heaven is like this." And the first four parables were said publicly to the crowd outdoors, while the remaining four were said to the disciples privately indoors. I am intrigued by the series of parables used. What about the kingdom of heaven are they revealing? Hence, I would like to invite you to join me in exploring these parables over five Sundays.

Matthew 13 begins by telling us that Jesus left the house and came to the sea where he sat down to teach. But when great crowds gathered around him, he got into a boat and pulled away from the shore to address them. Jesus used parables to tell the people many things, and these are the two parables for us today:

"The kingdom of Heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches." And the other parable is: "The kingdom of Heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with a bushel of flour until the whole batch of dough rises."

Which parts of these two parables have struck you or impressed you?
What picture or image fills your imagination as you listen to the parables?
What are they telling you about the kingdom of heaven?

If you are wondering what they are about, these parables are serving their purpose. We may be asking the same question as the disciples too: "Lord, why do you use parables when you talk to the people?" The disciples asked this for the people's sake and themselves because they also struggled to understand the parables later in the chapter.

Indeed, some of us may find some of Jesus's parables difficult to understand as we are used to thinking literally, while others gifted with imagination may find most parables easy to comprehend. So what is Jesus's purpose in using parables? In reply, Jesus explained that he used parables in talking to people was so that they look, but would not see, and they listen, but would not hear or understand. This is quoting the words God had given Isaiah, as recorded in Isaiah 6:9-10 and heard in today's first reading.

God instructed Isaiah to tell the stiff-neck Israelites, saying, "No matter how much you listen, you will not understand. No matter how much you look, you will not know what is happening." And God wanted Isaiah to make the minds of these

people dull, their ears deaf, and their eyes blind so that they could not see, hear, or understand. Because if they did, they might repent, and God would forgive and heal them.

In my childhood, whenever I misbehaved, my mum would warn me that if I didn't stop that behaviour immediately, she would send me to the police. Therefore, I believe that the intent of the prophecy is exactly the opposite of what was said. It was a warning, hoping the Israelites would be truly sorry for their disobedience to God and repent.

Similarly, instead of teaching them directly, Jesus's intent in talking in parables was to get the people thinking and challenge them with puzzling thoughts to spend time pondering so that when they eventually understood, the teaching would impress their hearts and minds.

Whenever you hear God's word, do you encounter it with your head, heart or both? I would say both so that I will not be too literal (that is, just using my head) nor too blind (that is, just using my heart). I approach God's word with faith and knowledge.

Jesus says (in verse 12) "For the person who has something will be given more, so that he will have more than enough; but the person who has nothing will have taken away from him even the little he has." Jesus is emphasizing the essentiality of faith. When we have faith in Christ, we shall be able to know and understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven as revealed by him. On the contrary, the unbelieving will naturally doubt anything said about the kingdom of heaven hence knowing nothing.

Indeed, without faith, any knowledge of Jesus will only be surface level, hence we shall listen but not hear or understand. Without faith, any experience of Jesus's healing or miracle will only be skin-deep, hence we shall look but not see. We must have faith to understand the good news about the kingdom of heaven truly.

Before we explore the parables, I guess it is essential to establish the basics. What is the kingdom of heaven? Especially when Jesus began his public ministry after being baptised, he proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). And also in the Lord's Prayer, we pray "May the kingdom come, on earth as in heaven..." So, what exactly is the kingdom of heaven to you?

Firstly, it is the same as "the kingdom of God" as in the other Gospels. Secondly, the Greek word βασιλεία (*basileia*), which is most commonly translated as kingdom, also means kingship, dominion, authority, reign or realm, hence it can also be "the realm of God." Jewish people around the time of Jesus had understood God's kingdom to be a physical kingdom on earth ruled by the Messiah, the One anointed by God, a King like David, to free them from the

Roman's rule. However, present-day Christian understanding is a spiritual realm of God governing our hearts and our way of life. But if you find this definition jarring and doesn't sit well with you, then perhaps consider it as the presence of God with you.

Maybe you have other understandings to define it. May I invite you to keep pondering as you ask yourselves: "What is the kingdom of God to me?" As we explore the parables next, and over the next few Sundays, hopefully each parable could provide an image to help build a fuller picture for you eventually.

So, let's now come back to the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast. Let us approach with the openness of heart and mind to learn the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. Let us also come with the understanding that the kingdom of heaven is a spiritual realm of God ruling our hearts and our way of life, or the presence of God with us.

In saying the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds and has grown to the greatest of all plants, become a tree, it is not literally stating that a mustard plant is the largest plant of all since Google will tell us that it is at most a tall shrub in Israel. It is better to be appreciated as a figure of speech to contrast the growth and transformation.

Similarly, for the yeast mixed with the flour. While we have "a bushel of flour" in the Good News Translation, many other English translations use "three measures or Omers of flour" since the original Greek text states σάτα τρία (*sata tria*) (or three satons) of flour. As I researched, 1 Omer is equivalent to 9.3 cups or 3.6 litres, so 3 Omers would be about 28 cups or 11 litres. Therefore, we are given the picture in this parable that a very insignificant amount of yeast is mixed with a massive lot of flour, and eventually turning the mixture into a gigantic dough.

So, what are these two parables revealing to us about the kingdom of heaven? What are the elements in the parables representing, and informing us?

As you ponder, these are a few possible thoughts:

- The mustard seed and yeast signify the humble beginning of the kingdom of heaven ushered by Jesus and the gigantic boom in its growth.
- Perhaps the idea is not to focus on the minuteness of the seed or yeast but on the eventual growth of the tree or dough to emphasize the eventual growth of the kingdom, which will be enormous and immeasurable.
- Perhaps just as the yeast causes the whole batch of dough to rise, the kingdom of heaven will shape this world eventually, according to God's creation plan.

- Just like the seed buried in the ground and the yeast mixed in the dough are present but invisible, the kingdom of heaven is present now with us, yet it is hidden. It will be fully revealed when Christ returns to bring forth the new heaven and new earth.

The next two are indirect thoughts, focussing on ourselves:

- Our faith is like the mustard seed, tiny at its onset when we first believed in Jesus. Through our constant engagement with Christ through reading and reflecting on his word and praying, our life in Christ grows as our faith in Jesus matures. As our faith in Christ blossoms, just like the mustard tree with birds nesting on it, we become Christ's missionaries to reach out to others and welcome them to experience the kingdom of heaven, the presence of God. From little things, big things can grow.
- Our heart, our life, and our entire being are like the dough in the parable. With our faith as the yeast well kneaded in the dough, though hidden or invisible to the naked eyes, it constantly transforms us into what God desires us to be. Our life transformation is essential for us to be in the kingdom of heaven.

Which of these or a combination of these thoughts aligns with Jesus's teaching that you have known so far, especially with his proclamation that the kingdom of heaven has come near?

I shall leave this open for you to continue discerning the meaning of these two parables as we begin this series about the kingdom of heaven. But one thing is certain: the hiddenness of the kingdom of heaven can only be seen with the eyes of faith, as Jesus explained his intent in talking in parables. From little things, big things grow. Let us never cease to approach Jesus in prayer, and discuss with one another for clarity whenever we struggle to understand. May we continue to seek Christ and the kingdom of heaven as our faith is nurtured. Amen.