

SERMON FOR ST GEORGE'S, EPSOM
MAY 7TH 2023

READINGS: Genesis 11:1-9

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45

If you, like us, watch the weather on TV1, you may, like us, be amused by the great variety of metaphors Dan the weather man manages to conjure up to describe weather systems. Some of the more memorable ones are: it's like Mother Nature's handbag, it's like starting a lawn mower, it's like a piece of chewing gum stuck to your shoe. Some kind of work and some definitely don't.

But metaphors are what we use when we try to explain something that is difficult to grasp. We take something familiar (though I'm personally not acquainted with Mother Nature's handbag) to help us understand something unfamiliar. Jesus was a genius at it which is just as well because we would probably never have grasped the concepts he was trying to convey without this help. We still struggle even with all the help he gave us and that's because they are such radical concepts, so counterintuitive and counter cultural. The teachings of Jesus could best be described as subversive. They undermined the accepted order of things and continue to do so.

Today we are looking at a phrase in the Lord's Prayer that is profoundly subversive – "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." Kingdoms are about social order. It's a strange coincidence that we are considering this on the very day that a new King is being crowned, with all the pomp and pageantry imaginable. Here in NZ we are in the run up to elections and America will soon begin their mind boggling Presidential electoral process. They are all about "kingdoms" or social organizations. So this prayer that Jesus encouraged us to say, is dynamite! It calls into question the existing models of social order

and sets before us a whole new understanding of how things should be. What the kingdom is like in heaven should be reflected in the here and now, amongst us. We are not to wait for a “here-after” but put it into effect now – on earth, as it is in heaven. That’s what God wills for our world.

So what is the kingdom of God like? What should we be doing to express it here on earth?

Well, says Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is like And here is a critical thing to understand about metaphors – they are limited. They give us pointers toward understanding but they can never capture the whole. We sometimes make the mistake of stretching a metaphor too far. Like the use of the term “father” for God. It helps us understand something of the nature of God but to then say that God is therefore male is to stretch the metaphor way beyond its purpose and its usefulness.

So Jesus, wisely, gave us lots of metaphors for the kingdom of God to give us the fullest picture he could. They are scattered throughout the Gospels but in Matthew some of them are clumped together. The Kingdom of heaven is like mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, a pearl of great price, a land owner hiring labourers, a king settling debts. Varied as they are they have one thing in common – they are quirky. Quirky enough to catch his hearers interest and quirky enough to startle them out of complacency. And they do the same for us.

We’re going to consider one of the metaphors Jesus used - the mustard seed.

In the ancient world no-one in their right mind would deliberately plant mustard seed. We could liken it to choosing to plant gorse in your garden. It was an invasive, undesirable pest that mucked everything

up. Because its seed was so tiny it was impossible for the farmer to know whether it had somehow got mixed with the seed that was supposed to be planted – the desirable seed, the productive seed – until it began to grow, then flourish, then take over! It was not what any farmer wanted in their garden. All the neat rows of desirable crops were invaded and disturbed and messed up by something no-one wanted.

And this was like the kingdom of God? You can imagine how startled the listeners of the time must have found this metaphor. If it had been carrots or potatoes or strawberries (using examples from our part of the world) it would seem to make more sense. Nourishing, useful, tasty. But mustard seed? Gorse? How does that make sense?

Let me read to you what one commentator writes:

In the Church we want to define what fits within it and what does not. We have Scripture; we have creeds; we have liturgy; we have tradition; we have convictions about baptism, about what makes one a Christian, about the way the Holy Spirit works. We have boundaries – nice neat rows of carefully tended doctrine and practise. Then, just to keep us honest and just when we are least expecting it, we also have the voice of God whispering in our ear ... forcing us to discern whether they are in fact our boundaries or God's boundaries. God is forever invading our orderly sense of things. The Kingdom of God, like the mustard seed, invades the cultivated soil of our certainties and creates something new. It is subversive and grows up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed and redeemed by our surprising, invasive God."

That leaves us with a lot to ponder!

The kingdom of God is not static. It is constantly evolving, constantly challenging, constantly invading, constantly upsetting the world and

our world views, even the ones we think are holy. This is how the Kingdom of God works – like a mustard seed. But what does this Kingdom look like on earth?

For that I'd like us to consider a story from the Old Testament. The story about the tower of Babel is a strange and puzzling one. Even for those who know little about Scripture the term Babel immediately conjures up images of chaos and disintegration. Like any story from Scripture, it requires us to ask, "What does this say about God? What does this say about us? What was the truth the writer was trying to convey?"

There are two ways of interpreting this story, which at first blush seem to have significant differences but they are not necessarily at odds with each another. Western thought is more comfortable with "either/or" alternatives rather than "both/and" but such polarities can be restrictive. Holding different views in tension is often much more instructive and honest. Life is seldom black and white.

A traditional understanding of the story of Babel is about God showing displeasure toward an arrogant people who were aspiring to be a super power. These folk wanted to create a nation people would look up to with awe and envy; so powerful and clever that nothing seemed impossible to them. And so they began to build such a nation, not only with bricks and mortar, but with a strong sense of patriotism that required uniformity. God saw the danger signs. When patriotism becomes paramount and security is sought via an intolerance of diversity then things are about to go awry. Before that way of thinking could be further entrenched, God scattered the people, made communication difficult between them and placed them in vulnerable positions where they would be forced to seek security through trust in God and not in their own cleverness.

We have seen this scenario played out over history time and time again. When nations, institutions, churches or individuals become focussed on pursuing status, maintaining power and seeking security through sameness, they lose their way, eventually imploding. What's happening at Gloriavale and to some of the mega churches are evidence of this dynamic, not to mention America and Russia at this time in history. But this dynamic is played out in small ways and large all the time. Whenever loyalty replaces conscience, fear replaces trust, bigotry replaces open-mindedness, pride takes centre stage, then danger lurks. False gods are being worshipped. This is not what the Kingdom of God looks like. In fact it is the exact opposite. Babel acts as a warning to us to be alert to the real motivations at play and then decide what is true and right, what is false and evil.

Shine a different light on this story and another truth emerges. Rather than this being God's punishment on an arrogant and puffed up people, God's actions can be seen as bestowing the gift of cultural diversity in order to create a more life giving environment for the people. We know that at the heart of a healthy eco system is an intricate pattern of natural diversity. It follows then that it must be the same for the human species too. The desire of the people in this Biblical story to create a powerful and invincible society by insisting on uniformity was not a portent of health. Babel therefore, was God's initiative to bring about an extravagant and rich diversity where all would not only find a place of dignity and welcome but were actually needed for the health and well-being of the whole.

This understanding is highlighted at Pentecost, which we will be celebrating in a few weeks. Under the iron rule of Rome, the people had been forced into uniformity of language and custom as a means of social control. But when the spirit of the resurrected Christ was unleashed, the disciples were empowered to go out into the streets and market places and share the good news with the many migrant

people who lived in Jerusalem, using their many different languages. Although, as subjects of Rome all of them would have spoken Greek, the language of the Roman military, the good news of Jesus Christ was shared with them in the language of their hearts, their mother tongue. At Pentecost diversity was celebrated, cultural differences were affirmed and the good news made plain in language, words and ways that were understood by all.

But at Pentecost another dimension was added to our understanding of the Kingdom of God. Not only does the Kingdom of God honour every permutation and combination of humanity but also affirms our unity. Underlying all the wondrous diversity of nature is a common pulse of life. No matter our differences, we all share the same breath of life, the same divine spark, for we all share the same Creator. At Pentecost diversity was celebrated but in a way that drew the people together in communion through a common understanding that at the heart of everything is God, love, made manifest in Jesus the Christ.

The will of God is that we, here on earth, create a community that subverts boundaries constructed to keep people in their place, celebrates the richness of diversity instead of being afraid of it, and recognizes that every living thing is connected through the creating power of God and therefore is divine and should be treated as such.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
AMEN.

Genesis 11:1-9

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east,^[a] they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore it was called Babel,^[b] because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth, and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Matthew 13:31-33,44-46

³¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with^[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.