

Sunday 26 July 2026

Liverpool Parish Church

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

OT: 1 Kings 3:5-12

NT: Romans 8:26-39

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

I am going to start my sermon with something that might seem a bit obscure and pedantic – no change there, I hear you cry – but please bear with me. It is relevant to what I want to say.

As you know, there are four gospels in the New Testament. We think they were written in their final form from about forty to seventy years after Jesus' death. Three of them – Matthew, Mark and Luke – have considerable overlaps. In other words, they shared material. Matthew and Luke both used a version of Mark, alongside other common sources and their own unique material. Remember too that all the names associated with the gospels come from later tradition. We do not know who the actual writer or writers were.

This means that the gospels we have are the product of a lot of telling and retelling, and a lot of editing. When we put them alongside one another, we can see this process at work.

For example, in the parable of the mustard seed, Mark says that the seed grows into a large shrub, and the birds make nests in its shade. Matthew and Luke don't think this is quite dramatic enough. Matthew says that the seed grows into the greatest of all shrubs and then becomes a *tree*, and the birds make nests in its *branches*. Luke drops any reference to a shrub, simply saying that the seed becomes a tree.

This might seem a trivial example. But it happens time and time again: stories told and retold with a different detail, placing or emphasis. We see this even in the most familiar examples such as the birth, death and resurrection stories.

This leads me to two claims. The first is that the Bible cannot be treated as God's direct speech, as the infallible unchanging word of God, without doing violence to the way it is actually written. If we read the Bible seriously and carefully, we cannot be fundamentalists about it.

And this connects with the second claim I want to make: that Jesus' teaching is not primarily based on the interpretation of the Bible (which in his case would be the Hebrew scriptures). Of course, he quotes scripture and butts heads with those who interpret it differently. But it is not at the heart of his teaching.

Instead, he teaches about the kingdom: not a territory, not a future state, but the active presence and power of God here and now. And he uses parables: stories and images, usually drawn from everyday life.

This is very striking. Jesus accepts and uses scripture and law, but they are not at the centre of his message. He accepts and worships in the Temple, but neither the place nor its sacrifices are key to his teaching. In other words, religious institutions, and religious authority are sidelined. They are not attacked so much as *bypassed*. The Temple will fall, the leaders will be scattered. And scripture has to speak to *this* moment, to what is coming to presence and fulfilment in people's experience: the kingdom of God has come among you.

When we turn to the parables themselves, we might often wonder at what they mean. The early church did: they sometimes tried to explain them, treating them as mysterious codes where every little thing in the parable stands for something. But it is unlikely that these explanations go back to Jesus himself. Most parables do not have one; and the ones that are given are, frankly, really clunky.

We might compare poems: if I 'explain' a poem to you, I likely end up depriving it of its power. I turn it into prose. It ceases to engage, provoke, and remake you.

The parables are more like poetry than prose. They offer stories and images to challenge us. They hold open an imagined space, and we are invited to enter. Like the best poetry, they can transform the way we experience the world.

So it is with the parables we heard today.

The kingdom is like a tiny seed which explodes into life and becomes a space of shelter. It is like the yeast that works through the whole of the dough. It is like the hidden treasure that is worth everything, or the merchant who found a thing of such value that he sold everything. It is the net that contains fish of every kind.

Each parable contains easily recognisable images from agriculture, fishing, domestic baking, folk tales and figures. The kingdom of God is near: it is woven into the earth which grows, baked into the bread we eat.

And what do we learn from them?

The kingdom of God is transformation: it is the seed that splits open to reveal the plant, wildly exuberant in its growth, inclusive in the shade it gives.

The kingdom of God reverses our expectations: it is yeast - even though, in Jesus' day, yeast was often an image of corruption. It is a merchant, apparently consumed by greed - but whose desire leads them to give up everything and cease to be a merchant anymore.

The kingdom is not about purity, or power. It does not reject scriptures, buildings, institutions - but nor does it depend upon them.

There is a taste of this in our second reading, even though Paul's focus on Jesus himself is very different. Paul reminds us that when words fail us, the Spirit prays within us in sighs too deep for words. Yes: the kingdom cannot be captured, explained, made into a dogma. The kingdom, like the Spirit, is life and breath. It grows and goes where it will.

And Paul also reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. yes: the kingdom is already here, already everywhere – not just in humanity but in all creation. It may be hidden. It may need us to tend it, work it into the dough of our fallen world. But it is here by grace, the undefeatable grace and gift of God.

It is the smallness, powerlessness and everydayness of the kingdom that is its most radical aspect. It unsettles our world. Just as Jesus himself unsettles our world: for he is small and powerless too. He becomes the victim of empire, state, church. He refuses the powers of exclusion, control, vengeance. He shows us the God of the kingdom: the God of the little and the least. The God who will not be defined by death. The God who is never an idol of power.

These parables are an extraordinary gift to us. We shouldn't try and explain them away or treat them as pretty images before moving on to more serious stuff. They are front and centre of Jesus' teaching. They can help us to share the gospel in ways that touch people's lives, without retreating into fundamentalism or judgmentalism of one sort or another.

So, stay with these parables. Live in them. Let them remake you in ways deeper than words.

As Jesus says: 'let anyone with ears listen!'

Fr Steven Shakespeare