#  Psalm 119.129-136Matthew 13.31-33,44-52

**30th July 2023**

## Big Issue Locked up in tiny Stories.

**Introduction to the Theme**
If you ask any preacher what is the thing most commented upon by people as they say goodbye at the door, it will usually be the stories we use in our sermons.

Nothing seems to make a more personal connection between pulpit and congregation than a story.

And it appears to have been no different in Jesus’ day. The bible calls them parables. Stories, often based on village customs or agricultural practices that instantly made a connection between Jesus and his listeners.

Maybe we wonder why the parables seem so significant in our Lord’s ministry? Was it, perhaps, because the established religious teachers either didn’t use them, or theirs weren’t quite so good. The Parables of Jesus, and there are a lot of them in today’s Gospel reading which we’ll hear in a moment, are central to his teaching about The Kingdom of God.

Indeed, here’s a verse we’ll hear today: *In all this teaching to the crowds Jesus spoke in parables; indeed, he never spoke to them except in parables.*

I think maybe my sermon class critic, when I was at theological college, would have told me to use perhaps a little more variety in my presentations!

There are five mini parables set before us this morning and here they are:

Two are preached to both the crowd and the disciples and they are the parable of the Mustard Seed and the one about Yeast. Then Jesus speaks alone with his disciples and teaches three parables about, hidden treasure, finding a beautiful pearl and finally about casting a net and hauling in a full catch.

What a day! Can’t you just imagine Matthew, who once added up figures for a living in his tax collecting years, now busy writing down notes as Jesus preached.

Today’s is a particularly fine batch of stories, and a few themes seem to bind them together.

They open up discussions about what faith looks like – because in a sense parables are more discussion starters than fully formed theological treatise.

The ones today about yeast, buried in the ingredients of bread that makes such a difference, or treasure that’s unexpectedly come to light or a wonderful pearl being discovered, well these are stories about how things hidden can still be so very valuable. Can that say something to us about quiet faith, about folk who shun the limelight but there in the background their deep sincerity and faithfulness in living out their Christianity can make a really positive contribution to life?

The story of the birds nesting in the mustard bush, or the full catch of fish, opens up a debate about welcoming all kinds of birds and fish, of not being particular but inclusive and of having a faith that seeks to be truly welcoming of others, of purposefully seeing God’s Kingdom present in both other people and traditions.

And then the most famous of today’s five stories is that small seed that grows into a twelve-foot-high mustard shrub. It would never have won prizes at the Galilee agricultural show for the most beautiful plant. A mustard tree was both surprisingly large and quaintly weedy at the same time.

And, just maybe, Jesus’ listeners would have immediately seen the surprise, even the absurdity, of likening the Kingdom of God to a Mustard Tree. Couldn’t he have chosen something more substantial and beautiful? Or is this part of the meaning too, that God’s Kingdom does manifest itself in ways we least expect and in expressions that could even be described as weak and weedy?

Today our sermon will try to explore some of the big issues locked up in these tiny stories.

**The Sermon**
*Gracious God, we open the bible and long to receive your word.
 Open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*So, what to make of these five parables.

At least three have the common theme of Things Hidden.

Yeast makes such a difference to size and shape, yet it quietly and efficiently does its work out of sight.

During Lockdown some of my friends became enthusiastic beadmakers and, during a shortage of yeast, both sourced supplies and sent it to each other in the post. There was no stopping them as they became Lockdown experts in Sourdough and Ciabatta!

Alongside the hidden work of yeast in bread, Jesus told stories of treasure, once hidden coming to light in a field along with the discovery of a pearl of great price emerging from the darkness of its shell.

Such pictures prompt our thinking as we affirm to each other that God’s kingdom, that blessing of love, peace and wholeness that can touch our lives, isn’t always obvious and can come to us in unexpected ways and through quiet, as well as loud, people.

Because goodness and kindness is often expressed out of sight, hidden from view. Like yeast, a quiet faith can have a profound impact, especially on people who know us most.

Not everyone feels comfortable or equipped for spotlight ministry. Yet we can all play our part, and a hidden ministry is often vital.

We thank God for the yeast which does its work so the bread can rise, just as we do for friends and fellow pilgrims who’s behind the scenes service is exemplary and blesses us all.

Now, of the tranche of parables that come thick and fast in Matthew 13, maybe the most memorable is that of the Mustard Tree, which begins its life as one of the smallest of seeds.

We often take comfort from this picture, maybe even equating it with the English proverb that huge oaks from little acorns grow, yet in reality what Jesus speaks of here is more of a bush than a tree, and was generally considered, in his day, to be a somewhat weedy one at that. So much so that some have suggested that his original hearers might have been just a little shocked that he uses the mustard bush quite so positively.

But, maybe, that’s intrinsic to the parable’s message. That God’s Kingdom does indeed grow, but not always as we expect.

Some bible teachers see here a developing tendency in Jesus preparing his followers for the idea of a Kingdom of God with upside down values in which some ideas seem absurd compared to traditional understandings of success.

As I’ve pondered this parable I’m left wondering if Jesus might deliberately be raising a contrast between the supposed weaknesses of the Kingdom of God and the generally accepted power and grandeur of the Kingdoms of monarchs and priests of his own day.

And, in many ways that’s not a new theme in scripture.

Saul, a man who stood head and shoulders above everyone else proved to be a disastrous first King of Israel, whilst his successor, David, who brought in a golden age was a youngest son and a simple shepherd boy.

Again and again scripture wants us to celebrate that God often uses the weak to bring about his good purposes. We just have to think of the Christmas story to see that illustrated again and again with the place of Mary, Nazareth and Shepherds – all expressions of a certain type of weakness – playing a central role in the greatest story ever told.

I love the title of Barak Obama’s autobiography in which he charts how a boy from the margins ended up as President, calling the book *The Audacity of Hope.* And maybe there is a certain *audacity* too when it comes to the idea of the Kingdom of God.

1997 was marked by two Ceremonial Funerals, thousands of miles apart. Sadly, one was in Britain as Diana, Princess of Wales was laid to rest. The other was in India, as a grateful nation honoured the memory of Mother Theresa. These two women, dying in the same year had a certain respect for each other yet their backgrounds were so very different. Perhaps we would have expected nothing less than our country marking the life of a Princess, yet I was both surprised and inspired that India choose to honour the life a diminutive nun, who owned no personal possessions, a lady who’s simple, generous, and loving lifestyle had become a bye word for ‘goodness’ throughout the world. Sometimes the supposedly weakest things in life turn out to be the strongest.

Maybe, in these days of increasing secularisation we wonder if The Church, now firmly on the margins and often feeling very fragile, can survive or continue to be a force for good. Perhaps as we age and feel our personal frailty, we wonder the same about our own continuing contribution to life?

Well, I think the message of scripture and the description of the Kingdom in parables like today’s is that God can and does take the weak things of life to bring about goodness. Perceived weakness is not so much an obstacle to the Kingdom but rather an ironic and wonderful constant characteristic.

In bringing this talk to an end I’ve left till last the parable image from this group of five which is my favourite, and it’s the birds flocking to nest on the mustard tree.

The other day whilst out of a morning dog walk, I stood still and drank in the beautiful bird song all around me. It was like a gentle choir from heaven serenading Pip and I as we walked down the lane.

So, I think it’s a beautiful picture, all sorts of birds finding a home in the mustard bush. And, in a way it’s a picture of us. For birds, in the New Testament, used in this way, can often stand for the Gentile nations who now, consciously and gratefully join together with our Jewish cousins and share in the generosity of God.

The bird references seem just like a fleeting sideline to the story, yet they are pivotal to its message. God’s Kingdom is marked by hospitality and welcome. Another parable imagines it in the open arm embrace of a loving father welcoming home a runaway son.

The full net of diverse fish, another of today’s stories has the same message. All are welcome.

So, once more maybe the subversive text in what, on the surface seems to be just five rather childlike stories, is that in contrast to the Kingdom of monarchs, emperors and religious autocrats so prevalent in Jesus’ day, kingdoms which were noted for their power, their boundaries and their sense of exclusion, God’s Kingdom is described as welcoming, hospitable, kind and embracing.

We need to remember that. We need to listen to all who are seekers after truth and not judge others by the yardsticks of our own ecclesiastical culture. For there are many birds longing for a home, who come from all sorts of places. What a wonderful thought that we can all find a place in the mustard tree.

God’s kingdom can often find its strength in weakness.

God’s kingdom has fuzzy boundaries, and hospitality and welcome are its intrinsic qualities.
God’s kingdom is like a gangly tree growing from a small seed, a hidden sprinkling of yeast that gives growth, a long-lost treasure, a precious pearl, and a diverse catch of fish.

And the themes of this Kingdom are love, kindness, hospitality, welcome and surprise.

Such big truths, locked up in such little stories.

In the name of Jesus, the teacher of parables. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 29th July 2023*