



Kirkcaldy and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 13:31-33

Background of the reading

When reading these two parables at first it seemed to me that the meanings were simple: faith start small like a mustard seed but ends up like being a big tree. To have faith is to change like yeast changes the shape of the dough.

However when I looked closely at the Greek text and considered the background of the Gospel of Matthew the meaning became much more unnoticed than I suspected it to be.

So what is the context of the Gospel of Matthew? Scholars generally agree that the Gospel of Matthew was written to a Jewish audience who converted to Christendom. They were people who knew the Old Testament texts and all the Jewish ritual laws by heart. It is no wonder that Matthew speaks in our reading of this morning of the kingdom of heavens instead of the kingdom of God because of the Jewish fear of misusing the name of God. Heavens, always in the plural form, is also a typical Jewish expression of the place where God lives.

So let us turn to our text now:

Jesus says the kingdom of heavens is like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his field". I think this phrase must have been shocking to Matthew readers because a mustard seed was considered as unclean, invading the healthy crops on the field. In Leviticus 19:19 the ritual law states: "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed". The mustard Jesus referred to may be the charlock or wild mustard, *Brassica. arvensis*, which normally grows from one to three feet (.3 to .9 meter) tall. The implication is clear: In the kingdom of earth no one is

allowed to plant a mustard seed but in the kingdom of heavens it is different. God would not exclude this man from the kingdom because he violated the ritual cleansing rules of society. He would not do what their society generally did by excluding people from the presence of God. In the kingdom of God everyone that has faith like a mustard seed is welcome!

Then to emphasise this point even more, Jesus tells us another parable. He says the kingdom of heavens is like yeast that a woman took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened. Again Jesus is referring to the ritual cleansing taboos of his society. Woman was generally associated with the unclean, the religious impure. Now this woman takes the yeast and concealed it into three measures of flour. The use of leaven was strictly forbidden in all offerings made to the Lord by fire according to Lev. 2:11.

Three measures refer to Old Testament:

- When Abraham received three guests at Oaks of Mamre, he ordered Sarah to make cakes of three measures flour.
- When the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon he prepared unleavened flour of three measures of flour and a goat as an offering to God,
- When Hanna dedicated Samuel to the temple, among her offerings were three measures of flour;

Three measures were much more than the normal but the amount connected with the appearance of God.

“Until all was leavened – the end of the process, the rising of the dough, which represents the corruption of the leavened bread.”

Again Jesus says: the kingdom of heavens is present among those who are considered as being unworthy by their society. It is present among the marginal. The kingdom of God is for everyone – not only for those they thought to be ritually clean, pure and holy by their laws of society which barred certain people to have a relationship with God.

Reflection and meaning of the reading

The text for the sermon

³⁴ *Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable*

Jesus was criticizing the rules of his society. He is actually saying what is man's impossibility is God's possibility. Jesus would show to them and us that He was the only one who could stand in the presence of God facing God with all our sins, faults and misgivings. He was the only one who made it possible for everyone to be part of the God's eternal kingdom. He broke down all the barriers that existed between God and humankind. He made it possible for everyone through faith alone to be citizens of heaven.

Even the man who planted the forbidden mustard seed and the woman who dared to put in yeast in an offering to God.

So if you are sitting in this church this morning and you feel that you are not worthy to be here, or that you are not as "Christian" as most of the others, or not so well groomed or too young or too old, or too poor or too whatever, you are at the right place. Jesus said the kingdom of heavens is for you with just one exception: you must believe that Jesus saved you. You must have faith. And if you have faith you have hope as well. You are part of God's kingdom. In his eyes you are saved. You are worthy. You are special. You are loved even if you feel not very loved at this present moment in time.

And if you still have some doubts, take part in the Holy Communion. It is God's way of welcoming you into his kingdom, into his presence. But you must leave with one goal. You must tell others about God's love for all humanity. You must show to everyone that if you are accepted so are they!

You must live in the weeks to come with this knowledge: everyone who has faith, has received the kingdom of God.

May we never ever forget this very reassuring message this morning!
Amen