

## Picture-poems help us find elusive wisdom

All Saints Kings Heath, Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023

1 Kings 3:5-12

Romans 8:26-end

Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Imagine a child sitting in the shallows at the seaside. A kindly wave comes and washes over them, unthreatening, but quite a drench. They giggle. Then another comes, and another, and the giggling rises each time, like being tickled, the child wants it to happen and doesn't. The quicker the waves come, the more fun the child has. Occasionally a slightly bigger wave comes and the child might feel slightly threatened for a moment. "Is this too big for me? Might I be in danger?"

I feel like that child as the parables wave, and there's hardly time to take them in before the next one comes. It's a kind of game. Jesus tickles us, splashes us, with more water than necessary, there's plenty more, and we aren't touched by all of it, but it doesn't matter. The fun is in our little self, feeling the vast sea's extravagance and tirelessness.

We could sit with each of the apparently light touch, brief, vivid parables with which Jesus almost overwhelms us for a day and find all sorts of depths, suggestions, possibilities. Each is a treasure, a pearl of great price you could say, to make his similes work double time. We can also, though, notice that he chooses to send them so swiftly one after another, and wonder why.

With each parable, Jesus appeals to his hearers' poetic sensibility. He makes us exercise our mind *and* open our heart with similes from ordinary life. Our lectionary, not unhelpfully, splits the Matthew teaching passage. Last week concentrated on the longer parable of the plants and weeds. Here we are given waves of smaller parables one after another. It's instructive, though, to check the structure of the chapter. The first two parables we have today are spoken to the crowd. Then, Jesus goes inside and the disciples ask for an intellectual explanation of the weeds and plants story (explored last week). He does explain, with an account of God's judgement, but then, v44 still in the room with the disciples, he returns to the smaller parables and overwhelms them with one after another. We may ask why.

Perhaps by responding to their request for explanation with a systematic unpacking of the weeds story Jesus says, "indeed, keep your mind alert, work your intellect in the realm of your faith, don't be afraid to ask." But then, sending image after image before they have time to work out any systematic meaning and organise them intellectually, he is saying "even more so, keep your poetic sensitivity alert and open, keep your heart open to surprise, and your self humble before God's unfathomable and inexhaustible care for humanity."

He has not short changed the crowd at all, but he is putting his disciples through more rigorous training. He begins to equip them to teach, to cajole, lovingly to tease. He is not directly, intellectually teaching the wisdom of the kingdom, but using visual poetry to exercise and prepare their hearts and minds in order to create the conditions in which mustard seeds of kingdom virtues are likely to take root in their life.

There's a paradox about these swift waves washing over us. For many of them contain images of stillness and waiting: the seed is planted but we wait for growth; the yeast is mixed and energetically kneaded, but then we must wait for it to ferment and make the dough rise. There is the silent treasure waiting to be found under the ground. There is activity in the merchant's wheeler dealing, but they have to wait until they have enough to buy the pearl. Jesus trains his

disciples for their double life: life in the Kingdom, lived as life in this world. "To understand the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, requires a people who refuse to be hurried," says Stanley Hauerwas.<sup>1</sup> He points out that sowing and kneading are images inviting us to share in "God's patience towards creation." "The task of the Church, he concludes, is to be uncompromisingly patient." We may be urgent in proclamation, and fierce in prophecy, but patient towards creation and patient about God's timing as s/he displays the kingdom through the lens of the church's life.

When the disciples have said "yes" to their training, Jesus observes "The scribe trained for the kingdom (including Matthew – he's breaking the fourth wall there, but also the future church whenever she accepts her priestly vocation for the world) draws treasures from the New (what is discovered in Jesus) and the Old (all the great Hebrew tradition which gestated and nurtured Jesus). Matthew always shows how the new discoveries in Christ echo with the riches of past revelation. Solomon is a wonderful Hebrew example of a heart-mind person, whose sense of self is healthy, humble, yet who does step up to the job and applies his whole mind. He calls himself a "little child," like that toddler in the waves, and in doing so, proves himself to be ready for the most grown up task of leading his people. When asked what he needs from God, he is patient enough not to make a grab for power, but to wait for wisdom.

(You might let him settle in your presence when you pray during this week, letting him stand among those you see as thrust into positions of leadership and asked to bear impossible burdens of responsibility today, as well among those you see grasping at leadership and power without the wisdom to use them for good.)

St Paul acknowledges how hard this radical patience can be; how frustrating to live in an aggressive and avaricious world when you trust in your gut the power of the pacifist, generous, Christ who overcame the death that world deals in. He describes the inarticulate groans as we join with creation in its travails. Creation's groans may be heard in wind and fire and flood even now. The patience of the church, waiting with yeast and seed, living in partnership with creation, will surely find itself tested to the limit, our groaning prayers joining with creation. But such guttural, wordless prayers, inspired by the Spirit Herself, are our most articulate. And they are not the end of the matter. Even still in this world, once he realises that the frustrated patience of the faithful is the gift of the Holy Spirit, Paul can celebrate in his richest praise-language that we are never separated from the vast love that forged and redeems and will make new the whole creation.

There is a certain patience built in to the parish system of which I am proud. We are here for the long haul. Yet there is agency, like the sowing and kneading, in active, worshipping presence, hospitality to people of diverse faiths, initiatives of care for older and younger people borne of long term experience of the needs of the neighbourhood. It's the Anglican Church's "Yes" to Jesus' question "have you understood this?" Like the disciples' yes, it's not perfect; it's not an entirely true, claim, but it's our oddly evolved way of drawing the old and the new out of the treasure store, and expressing the kind of radical patience we've understood the Kingdom kindles. It's how we apply and pass on the training God has given us. As, again, Hauerwas says, their "yes" is not a final qualification, but the beginning of their journey of teaching, sharing, explaining and more importantly evoking the kingdom, living the playful poetry of the Kingdom. How does it manifest here?

A few weeks before our holiday, we put this old building with its hierarchical history to work by offering it as a backdrop for Kings Heath Pride celebrations, the traditional iconography precisely becoming radical, humbled by the grace of gay neighbours willing to accept the hospitality of a formerly – no, *still* prejudiced institution. Two weeks later, in the same space, the established

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew - Brazos theological commentary 2006 p133 ff

church was humbled in a parallel, but different way as we hosted, but in turn were hosted by Muslim neighbours celebrating Eid. I feel proud that when raising these possibilities the whole demeanour of your Church Council was to say "yes" to what is life giving, what teaches us, what puts our old resources to the service of the new. Without self-righteousness, but with child-like willingness, in coming here on a soon to be rainy Sunday morning, each one of you displays both the patience and radical openness required for the Kingdom to be known and for the planet to be loved. Others do it, too, in their own way. We are not an elite, but we do in our own terms accept a certain discipline. We've come for training week by week that may be a bit more intense than others experience, but its purpose is the well being of others. Offering ourselves to be trained in mind-heart, thinking-feeling, patient-active, old-and-new kingdom living is hopefully our individual "yes" which together makes the All Saints modest "yes" possible.