

***'Scribes of the Kingdom'* – Sermon for Sunday 30 July 2023**

**Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

What a crowd we were, from all the villages and countryside around, listening to Jesus as the ripples of the lake lap on the shore. There were so many, he was sitting in a boat out in the bay, the cliffs of the little cove making a natural amphitheatre (so much better than the great buildings the Romans are putting up). Didn't we love his stories? How we chortled about the farmer who just threw his seeds around everywhere without bothering where it fell! How we scoffed at the landowner who let his servants laze around rather than weeding his crops! Great stories, but you couldn't help thinking there was more to them, some sort of deeper meaning. What a lucky group they were, his twelve best friends, to whom explained everything. How I'd love to be one of them.

So, I'm back for more: today, there are no long stories – just snippets, like riddles, keeping you guessing. He holds a tiny speck in his hand – you can hardly see it. Yes, a mustard seed ... and we all know how mustard grows. (Bit of an exaggeration to say birds make nests in its branches, but we get the point!) Great things have small beginnings. Then he's onto yeast ... and I get it! It's the greatness of the small! You only need a little, but spread it out and mix it in. Then will you get the bread to rise. Then will you get something far bigger than you imagined.

But now we're onto something else – treasure in a field, found, and put back (silly man – I'd just have taken it), sell everything to buy the field and get the treasure by rights. A pearl, also, so beautiful it's worth selling everything to get it. Well, it's a bit daft, isn't it? I mean, what would you eat? But never mind: here's something so valuable it's worth everything the world can offer. We all want a bit of that. Then Jesus remembers he's in a fishing boat, so grabs a net and holds it up and asks us to think of all the things that will end up in the net when it's dragged on the bottom of the lake, and tells us there'll have to be a big sorting out, the true catch from the rubbish, when the boat comes to shore.

'Do you understand?' he asks. 'Yes,' we all cry out. 'Yes, we understand. Give us more.' Of course, we don't understand. Haven't really got a clue. But we want to be in there. We want what he's got. We want to be part of the movement. He's smiling, and finishes, 'In that case, you'll be like scribes who are on top of both old teaching and new.' That sounds a bit beyond me, but could I, could I really, be a teacher of the things Jesus has taught? If I really followed him, could I explain it to others?

I go back home to Nazareth and start trying to explain. But they're all so cynical. You think this man's your king, Messiah even: no one's ever heard of him. You think you're a big crowd, but you're all from a few little villages in Lower Galilee – no one from anywhere important. The Romans haven't even heard of him, or they'd already have dealt with him: you can be sure of that. I start to think again about what Jesus said. Now, his words actually make more sense. It's true, his movement is very small and no one important has noticed, but that's just like the mustard seed. And his words are like yeast that works invisibly through the dough – they get into your head! The question is for me, I can feel him asking: do I really think this treasure is worth giving everything for? Am I ready to move from being one of the crowd, a spectator having a day out, or will I shift to being a follower, a disciple – learning, doing, explaining. Will I put my hat in the ring to be a scribe of the kingdom of heaven?

Shift forward some 40 years. Matthew the Evangelist is completing his Gospel. Matthew is conscious of being a 'scribe of the kingdom who brings out new treasures and old,' the new teaching and actions of Jesus the King, and how this is built on the ancient teaching God gave Moses. He writes for all time, but he writes also for his own time, to help own church community through difficult times. They are, we believe, a Jewish Christian community in a cosmopolitan urban setting, a city like Antioch in Syria. On the one hand they are being rejected and persecuted, especially rejected by the synagogues they were brought up in. On the other hand, the Jesus' movement is becoming so dominated by Gentiles you might wonder if there's still a place for Jews, even though Jesus was Jewish. This community feels caught in between. Perhaps best just to keep your head down.

Matthew wants to remind them of the special place they hold, recipients of the ancient treasure of the Scriptures, and of the new treasure in Jesus himself. He places this block of parables of the kingdom right at the heart of his Gospel, the middle of five main blocks of Jesus' teaching. They need to be reassured that the kingdom of Jesus is not about numbers or size – but it will grow – and its growth may be in places they weren't looking, and it may be surrounded by what they'd think of as weeds. Matthew challenges these believers not to retreat into themselves, or into the anonymity of the crowd, but encourages them to be disciples – do-ers not spectators – themselves 'scribes of the kingdom of God' for those who are yet to hear.

Scroll forwards the better part of another 2000 years. We hear these parables as ancient treasures and need to hear them as if for the first time. There are enough of us here to feel we're a nice little crowd, but in comparison with our whole population, then depressingly few in number, sidelined in society and continually hearing a narrative of decline and failure. Jesus' parables of the kingdom can sound like sentimental nostalgia in our high-tech world. And yet the message is still pertinent today. Although our culture is tempted by the 'big is beautiful' mentality, we know power is in the small things. It's the micro-chip that runs the world. A word tweeted has the power to go viral and change public opinion in an instant. An actual virus, tiniest life-form, is able shut down the world. 'The small' clearly has power to do harm as well as good, so parables of weeds and nets telling of sorting and judging are still clearly relevant.

So, what do we need to be reminded of: first, to be assured of the irresistible growth of God's kingdom, growth that is not quantifiable by church attendance statistics. Second, this growth is from small beginnings and takes time. We saw that in our parish when we set of Place of Welcome, and pray the same will happen for Criss-Cross. Third, God's work is often hidden. Our own experience tells us God works in our hearts and minds. Trust him to be working in and for others as well! Fourth, God is at work in society outside of what we call church. Often our job is to discern what God is doing and then try to get involved. And fifth and final: God's work is infinitely precious – treasure worth more than all the proverbial tea in China. In our age, as in every age, it needs those who hear Jesus to be inspired not only to be listeners only but do-ers also; not spectators but activists of his kingdom; not just part of the crowd, but followers and disciples who can make disciples – to be 'scribes of the kingdom who bring out old treasures and new.'