

Reflection

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

There was a moment, when I was reading in preparation for today's service, that I grumped: why wasn't this Epistle reading with last week's Gospel reading???. There was a point where ideas matched together so well as I read:

Perhaps the greatest comfort here lies in the fact that we too are creatures. If *no* creature can separate us from God's love, then in the end even our own almost limitless ability to rebel against God is overcome; and we are saved from our last and greatest enemy, ourselves (Interpretation, p. 150).

No creature can separate us from God's love, and that includes ourselves. Aren't we so often the real enemy of ourselves? We might blame others or project it onto other people, but so frequently it is what we do.

It reminds me of earlier in the year writing a unit on self-improvement for a prison cohort and telling the story of how at the same time I had a foster child in serious trouble at school, her daughter was also having problems at the same school. I found the school incredibly helpful, whereas she... I won't fill in exactly what she said but an expletive laden rant at their uselessness is a good description. What made the difference? It was our attitude towards the school and people of authority.

OK, to go on a minor detour, this is not to discount the environmental and systematic factors that shape our behaviours. They are just as important – and often more important – than what is within individual control. And I quite readily admit the main difference was that while I had life experience that taught me that people in authority were there to help, her experience, having grown up as a DCP child, was the opposite.

But why did I tell this story in writing the unit, and why am I telling it now? For the same reason. To illustrate how often after the environmental or systemic problem has gone we continue to behave as if it is still there. On these occasions, we do need rescuing from ourselves.

All this does have relevance for our Gospel reading today – and not just for the last parable of sorting the fish. The original

audience, both of the teaching of Jesus and of Matthew's Gospel, were a fledgling movement trying against the odds to show a different way of relating both to each other and to God. Like us, sometimes this was hard work. Unlike us, sometimes this meant they faced discrimination or even persecution. So, Jesus is speaking to encourage them.

The mustard seed isn't a particularly small seed by our standards, but at least among seeds that are cultivated for food and flavouring, it is a fairly small seed. It doesn't grow into a huge tree either, something more like a perennial shrub of something between knee and head height. But like all annual plants, they put out masses of seeds to make sure new plants grow next year. A single mustard seed put into a field (which no sane farmer would do) will give a single plant this year. Next year they will have spread and so on until the field is taken over by this little, hardy plant.

In the same way, the amount of yeast taken is only small, but the outcome is large. The amount of flour mentioned in this parable would make enough bread to feed a whole village.

These two parables are about God's action in growing the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our next two parables give two images of people encountering the Kingdom of Heaven. One person – the anonymous man – stumbles on it by accident. The other person – the merchant – has been dedicated in his search for this. Here we have two parables about the human response. It does not matter how we encounter the Kingdom of Heaven. It matters how we respond to finding it.

I wanted to focus on the parables as a word of encouragement. As a congregation we are moving towards developing a mission plan for how we will focus (not limit, I must say) our engagement in this community. At the start, this often feels overwhelming. We know what the church once was, we see what it is today and how society no longer connects to traditional church. What difference could the efforts of our little congregation possibly make in all of this?

These parables remind us – to put it in the words of the Paul Kelly song – from little things, big things grow. We do not need a large planting programme to eventually fill the field with mustard

weeds. We only need a small amount of leaven to make enough bread to feed the village. It simply takes a bit more time, but it still happens.

As we prayerfully listen and reflect, we are searching for the treasure for this community. We may find it by that careful searching, but it is also possible that we stumble upon what will help people explore their relationship with God.

Are we trusting and open to this growth? What is stopping us from the change that we need so the Kingdom of Heaven in this area may grow? Perhaps at this point we get back to what I said at the start: No creature can separate us from God's love; what do we need to overcome so that our greatest enemy to this is no longer ourselves? How do we truly show faith in God who was active in the tiny movement initiated by Jesus and who continues to be active today?