

Trinity 8, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023

1 Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:26-end. Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Father Christopher

How do you think you will change over the next year? How about the next ten years? Any idea? Do you think you will? And I'm not just talking about your hair colour, your waistline, your *hairline* even. I'm talking about who you are, what you believe in, what you care about. Do you think those things will change?

Well, I remember thinking about this when I stopped being a barrister and started my training for the priesthood. Rather than training, what you undertake is more properly called formation: you are being formed to be a different person. "How can I change" I thought? "I'm Christopher, that's who I am, and who I've always been". Yet by the time I left Westcott House in Cambridge, and then my curacy parish in Catford, I realised I was actually a different person. Still of course very much a work in progress, as I continue to be, but in each of those three year periods, looking back, I could see how I had changed. And indeed, I'm sure I have changed during my two years here. You have changed me; God has changed me.

But change, inner change, isn't just for priests. I only give my example because I happened to notice, and because they had been particularly intense periods of my life. But think about how you have changed since you were at school; since you've been in a relationship; since you started coming to church. Can you see things that might have changed? More patience? Less patience? Calmer perhaps? More irritable? More prayerful? Prayer is I think one of the things that changes us most, over a period of time. Steadily, imperceptibly, but God does change us, in ways we cannot see at the time. And He changes the world too.

At the time we cannot see how, and we cannot see into the future, at least not with certainty. And yet, we are in the midst of change. Most of the time I think we imagine ourselves to be the finished result – we think of ourselves as the finished article, the finished me, the finished Christopher Rogers; and yet we will carry on changing. That is what time does; it is what history *is*; it is where God acts.

And this is the permanent, inscrutable conundrum that I think this morning's gospel is addressing. There is no answer for how God acts in time, no one explanation.

And that is why Jesus uses parables. He doesn't say, '*This is how God acts in history.*' He's not a lecturer. Instead He says: '*The kingdom of heaven is a bit like this, it's a bit like a tiny little mustard seed, that grows over time into a great tree. But then again, it's also like this, a pearl that you'd give everything up to own.*' Each example can't sum it up, but put them all together, and you start to get an idea. The kingdom of heaven is operating in this world, though will only come to fulness and completion at the end of time.

But what do the different examples, the parables, tell us about the kingdom of heaven, and how it works? Well the mustard seed clearly tells us that from the tiniest beginnings, the most enormous, incredible things are possible. We may have no confidence in small things naturally, and yet, with God, they can change everything. Imagine if Alberta Williams King had been told

in 1932 that her 3 year son Martin would be critical in changing the hearts and minds of so many in his country and in persuading them that a sea change was necessary in civil rights for black Americans? She might have laughed, as Sarah did when she learned that she would bear a child, and that she would have as many descendants as the stars in heaven. And the parable of the yeast. The kingdom of heaven works away unseen, until we see the results.

Both the mustard seed and the yeast give us hope. We are in history, in the midst of things happening to us, and around us. We cannot see what lies ahead, or how God is working in us now. And yet He is. He acts in us just as He acts in the growing mustard seed or in the yeast which lifts the flour it works away in. So is God in us, and so are we in the world.

And what of the treasure and the pearl? Well they tell us something else about the kingdom of heaven: they tell us of the great value of the kingdom; of the great value of God's action in our lives and as our hope for the future. We may spend our days toiling to live in as nice a house as we can find or afford; we may worry about whether we can afford to go on holiday; or what kind of car we drive. But we have found the most valuable thing in our life, and we should hold it as dear as the man who sells all that He has to possess the field with the treasure in it; or to buy the single pearl of great price that is our faith; that is the person of Jesus Christ who should be at the heart of our service of God and neighbour; that is the kingdom of heaven, present now, today, in our life, in our church; and that is the kingdom of heaven in which we will dwell after this life.

But we have to be open to it. We have to be open to God's action in our lives. We have to be open to changing and to being changed. We have to allow that yeast to work away in us. We have to allow that mustard seed of faith, of God in us, to be nourished in prayer, in spending time being with God; and then it will grow; *we* will grow and change, in ways we never could have imagined. We all have the pearl of great price; we have the thing which is greater than anything else we could want in life. We just have to let it work away in us, and respond by drawing closer to God, to nurturing that faith that is within us.

This gospel passage ends with another parable, one of judgment. The kingdom, at the end of time, is like a net thrown into the sea, catching every kind of fish; and the good are put into baskets and the bad thrown away. You won't hear a huge amount about judgment at St Mary Abbots, partly because many find it difficult to work out what being thrown into the fiery furnace means, though Mother Emma preached very powerfully about it last week I thought. Does the God we believe in create some people, only for them to face eternal damnation? I for one struggle to believe that, and it is not immediately obvious that that is what Jesus is saying here either.

Jews for one had a very strong idea of salvation being something that happened in *this* life, rather than the kind of medieval division between heaven and hell that we have grown used to. And yet there is also a sense of there being a decision, a judgment of a kind at the end of time. I can't give you a definitive answer on what that will look like, or precisely what Jesus means here. And nor should I – there is a reason Jesus speaks in parables, and if He wanted us to have a black and white answer to these questions, He would have given it to us.

But what I think *is* clear from this whole range of parables that He gives us, from the humble mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure, the pearl of great price and the net, is that when we find things of the kingdom of God - and we know them when we do - we must open ourselves, body and soul, to their nurture and protection, and that there will be consequences depending on how we respond. And we must give all our being to growing the fruits of the kingdom here on earth, whether through the church and in our openness to God in prayer; or through ending famine, oppression and prejudice, and allowing the kingdom to flourish in their place.

In this gospel passage, Jesus is evoking a whole range of experiences using pictures that people would have understood, so that we would be able to recognise how the kingdom of God works in the world, and how it can work in our lives. He does not define it, because that is impossible, but He helps us to develop our *scent* for it, our *taste* for it. And the more we respond to the things of the kingdom in our life, the more they will grow; the more we will be transformed; and the more we will transform the world.

That mission is so great, so glorious, that it can only find its consummation - its summation, its satisfaction and its total glory - *after* this life, *out* of the time and the history into which Jesus erupted to bring the God who is eternal into the life of humanity, into *our* lives. And the choice for us is whether to accept that gift, to nurture it, and to be transformed by it. That is a question for each and every one of us, every day of our lives.

Amen