

# Called to be builders ...

## *... of the Kingdom of Heaven*

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*A sermon given on the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, 30th July 2023 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster*

*Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49*

I'm going to give you a new word which you can drop into the next dinner party conversation that you have. The word is 'pericope'. It's Greek, P-E-R-I-C-O-P-E. It means a short piece of text. And the scriptures are full of them - look at the gospels. And this morning we have a series of those little pieces, a series of parables, all about the kingdom. Now, it may just be that Jesus did actually use all those parables, all those similes, in one sermon. More likely perhaps, Matthew found a whole series of sayings about the kingdom and he decided to put them all together for neatness sake. And of course, they're really quite different - they have different aspects of the kingdom - you can't line them up exactly. Like any simile, it's meant to be 'like', not 'is', 'like'. And they're quite different. And there are five of them this morning, but I want to just deal with four and start not at the beginning, but towards the end with the two: the one about the pearl of great price and the one about the treasure in the field.

We may have an image of the kingdom of God as something which happens at some remote place and time in the future, a sort of glorious final triumph of God and his Christ and the establishment of his rule on earth. Well, yes, there is an endpoint - that is quite clear from scripture. But Jesus over and over again emphasises that the kingdom is actually something which is near us; it is something which we can enter into or experience or indeed even embody in the here and now. And the parable of those short sayings about the pearl of great price and the treasure buried in the field tell us that the kingdom is something worth seeking after; it's precious; it's something that deserves all the effort that we can give it in order to bring it about.

And as we look at our world with all its many, many problems: its violence; its seeming ability to consume itself; the human race consuming the earth at a terrifying rate - it may seem that the kingdom of heaven is something that we hardly have got time to worry about - or something which is impossible to achieve. And yet Jesus is saying to us that the kingdom of Heaven is something so important that it should become our highest priority. That doesn't mean to say that other things, both everyday things of our own lives, or indeed the big issues of our day, don't matter. But what he says elsewhere is "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and then all of these other things will be added unto you.*" So if you

see the role of yourself at the church in the world as bringing in God's kingdom, then that gives you, if you like, a framework, a setting for all the other achievements, battles that you may have to fight. All the issues that confront us every day in our world: issues of violence; issues of depletion of resources; issues of prejudice. If we put seeking the kingdom of God first, it gives us a priority - it gives us a framework. And also it is something which the Spirit will aid us in bringing about.

And then there are those two first little parables, the one about the mustard seed and about the leaven. The mustard seed, the Middle Eastern mustard seed is one that is absolutely minute and yet does grow into a very, very large shrub. Ditto leaven, a little leaven in a large lump of dough will cause it to rise. So Jesus is saying here that even very small things can produce great fruits. And when lots of small things happen, then the results can be quite extraordinary.

Just think for a moment of your own lives - what you can do to bring about God's kingdom. Now that may seem an impossible task, but when each of us does some small thing for the kingdom: some kindness; some bit of campaigning; some love shown for the stranger or the outcast - that is then building the kingdom, and Jesus would say to you, like as he says to others, *"You are not far from the Kingdom of God."*

And we do see, even in the worst of situations, signs of hope, signs of love; we see human goodness rising above evil; we see human goodness enduring even in face of great tribulation; we see those who put their lives at risk daily to fight fires across the world; we see those in our hospitals who, under tremendous pressure, go on caring.

And we can have a part in it - and that's one of the most exciting things about being a Christian: it's not just coming to church; it's not just believing the right things. It's being part of this great enterprise of building the kingdom of God.

Now, it's not often that I quote Noel Coward in a sermon, but there is one of his plays, it's called *Cavalcade*. And basically it's a sort of family saga which takes you through [I can't remember quite what the limits are, but it certainly takes you through] the First World War: so it's the ups and downs, the trials, the tragedies, the joys of a family. And there is a speech at the end and it's talking about the First World War and the great suffering there, but also about the self-sacrifice, the goodness, of those who helped each other out. And the character says, "These things brought a strained heaven out of an unbelievable hell." And that's something that we can be part of even in the worst of situations, the most difficult of problems that face our world. We can be ones who can help bring a 'strange heaven out of an unbelievable hell.'

And of course, the last of the parables is about what happens at the end -and the judgement will not be based on a sort of moralism or did you follow all the rules or did you believe all the right things? It will be, "How did you treat others?" And that, if you like, connects to the parable of the sheep and the goats about those who do good, do it for Christ - and those who do good are therefore building the kingdom.

That is our calling; that is our privilege; that is our joy: to be builders of the kingdom of God.

# Reading Text

## Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

<sup>44</sup> 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.'

<sup>45</sup> 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.'

<sup>47</sup> 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'