

Sermon - Matthew 13.31-33

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 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.' 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.'

Jesus tells stories to his first followers to tell them what the kingdom of God is like – they sound quite cute – little seeds that become bird filled trees and yeast making the bread rise. But suppose the stories that sound cute would actually have sounded seriously offensive to the people listening to Jesus. Just suppose these stories were shocking, on a level with Jesus telling us the kingdom of God is like a virus that takes over the whole world.

Whaaaattttt! I hear myself saying and maybe you saying too.... The kingdom of God surely can't be that disruptive or painful or life changing – can it?

If we look carefully at what the people of the time would have understood by what Jesus said, we can see that it really was shocking.

If we think of the mustard seed – we might picture a nice tree with birds – but according to Pliny - a writer from the ancient near east – the mustard seed is a “pernicious weed” - the mustard seed is tiny and hard to see so that when sown is tenacious and difficult to get rid of. Before long it is everywhere - a tiny seed but if it is added to the mix it soon catches on and spreads like wildfire. A bit like Japanese knotweed perhaps. If you are unlucky enough to have encountered Japanese knotweed you will know that weeds like this will wreck your garden - and quickly... so surely the kingdom of God isn't like that - is it?

Well maybe that is precisely what Jesus meant in this parable.

What about the yeast? For any of us baking bread in lockdown we want that yeast to activate and make our dough rise. But in these times of Jesus it was unleavened bread that was desired – yeast would ruin the dough. The amounts Jesus talks about paint a picture of a party sized amount of flour – we're talking bread for hundreds of people rather than one loaf – and so the mountain of baked unleavened bread would be utterly ruined.

Both parables are about a small tiny thing that is irritating.

So what is Jesus saying about the kingdom of God? How can we understand more clearly what Jesus was saying and what would the message be like if he was speaking to us today?

Imagine someone listening to these parables at the time of Jesus - the kingdom of God is a pernicious weed or a pesky bit of yeast - the main message is that the kingdom of God is disruptive - it is subversive - it is not what is expected.

Yeast is often used in the Gospels and Rabbinic writings to describe something toxic spreading and poisoning something - the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod are not cute references - so if we dare to read the yeast as a first century follower of Christ we might understand that the kingdom of God: the reign or rule of God in the world is actually terribly powerful and is contagious and spreads quickly.

So how would those first hearers of the parables understood Jesus?

Surely they would have laughed – been a bit shocked – maybe walked out in disgust...?

After all, how do you feel if I say the kingdom of God is like coronavirus?

Seriously? Its distasteful – isn't it?

So why did Jesus say these things? Who would have found this Good news? Would anyone have heard it and thought – wow God loves me!

I think that the people who would have been glad to hear these words of Jesus were – the sinners – the outcasts – those who weren't deemed good enough – those who don't have the privileges – the ones thought to be the disruptors of society. These people would have excluded by the religious authorities. But they were included by Jesus – these are the kingdom of God.

Think about it in our times – the kingdom of God is not about the establishment: a cosy middle class white privileged church – the kind of church that talks poshly and know how to hold a teacup – the kingdom of God belongs to real people, people as they are – with mental health issues – unable to be quiet – speaking in an accent that is not always heard. The kingdom of God is for everyone.

Please understand, I am not against cosy or middle class. I am against a church that believes it to be narrowly defined in who it accepts. That is what Jesus was trying to shake up.

The kingdom of God is outrageous. It does not stay quiet. It does not sound like it only belongs on the set of Downton Abbey. It is diverse and colourful and infected with God – and with us – we are so entwined with God – God is so entwined with us. The kingdom of God is here and its wild and it will spread like wildfire like a crazy virus – and it will disrupt – absolutely all of our lives.

Being part of this great movement may even cause us to suffer because the kingdom of God is not a place where we are cushioned from harm – it may even surprise us with new learning and new ways of being.

Are we ready to be part of the disruption?

What in your life would be disrupted if you dare to follow Christ?

What or who would you attract if you lived as God loves you?

Think about the parable of the mustard seed – those cute birds who may not be as cute as we thought - maybe the birds are like people who we don't normally associate with the kingdom, being attracted to it, and wanting a piece of it. Do we really want to share our lives with pests - with these other people who want a bit of Jesus too?

It is easy for us to think we 'own' God because we are the believers. But God is not owned. God is Spirit and God is free. God is not held in by tastefulness – or desire to make things feel nice, look nice, sound nice – God is like a weed or yeast or a virus - if we are bringing in the kingdom, others will be attracted, but they may not be people like us. They may be different from the person we normally associate with. We might not even like them very much... this is all very disruptive!

They may be of a different class. They may be a different age. They may have complicated problems; they may be more righteous than us; they may have some different ideas about how to worship God... but they are attracted to the church nonetheless. Jesus attracted all sorts of undesirables and generally the religious elite didn't want them included in the family of faith. Not prostitutes, tax collectors and lepers, please.

The mustard seed and the yeast and the virus – they all start small. They are hardly noticed - tiny and small almost secretive but silently growing until they take root and then infect and disturb everything around them.

How can you actively bring in the kingdom starting in the smallest ways? Is it loving other people maybe in our families in our workplaces perhaps as God loves us? Is it a different attitude to money? Is it a different attitude to time? Is it a different attitude to our life goals and our life choices?

Whatever we do to bring in the kingdom - Jesus is telling us that our small Godly actions will bring in God's world and they will disturb the status quo - they will disturb others and they will turn our usual worlds upside down.

Be encouraged that the kingdom is growing here - whether we like it or not - the weed has taken root, the yeast is spreading and the virus is out there - it may look small at first, but it is growing and it will be disturbing and God is totally entwined in all of it.

May we bring in the kingdom together

Amen