



A People of the Kingdom 1

Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

We have come to the end of our exploration of what sort of people we should be. We saw how we should be people of power, praise, witness, integrity, prayer, obedience and unity. Why should we pray that Jesus should build His church? So that His kingdom, His rule is extended here on Earth.

We are a kingdom people, under the authority of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. What does that authority, that Kingship mean in our lives?

Jesus spoke many times about the kingdom of heaven, and that is particularly strong in Matthew's Gospel which focusses very much on the kingship of Christ. Most commentators equate the Kingdom of Heaven with references to the Kingdom of God elsewhere in the NT.

But what exactly is the Kingdom of Heaven? It would be easy to think that it is territory. For example, the United Kingdom covers a set geographical area. So we might say that the Kingdom of Heaven is Heaven – after all, God is definitely sovereign there. But it's also true that there are many places in the world where even though land is under the control of one power, people desire to live under the rule of another. So for example in our own land, even though it is a kingdom under the authority of Queen Elizabeth, there are those in for example in Scotland who do not want to be under her rule.

And in our own world, there are those who are under God's authority because they are in Christ and those that are under what they think is their own rule, or the rule of another religion – or to put it bluntly are under the rule of satan.

So kingdom is not just about territory, but about authority. So the Kingdom of Heaven isn't just something up there but something that is in the hearts and minds of those who place themselves under the rule of Christ. Jesus explains the Kingdom of Heaven using parables which start along the lines that "the kingdom of heaven is like".

In our passage this morning we have five parables as to what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Mustard Seed
Yeast

Hidden Treasure
A Fine Pearl

A Net (it's actually one of two similar and we are going to look at the other tonight – the parable of the Wheat and the Tares.

Conveniently for the preacher, they come in three groups as you can see. So what is the Lord trying to teach us through these parables.

◆ The Mustard Seed and Yeast

Both of these parables are about small and insignificant things that grow into something big. I found the parable of the mustard seed fascinating. It appears four times in three gospels. It is was memorable for an obvious reason. You see, there is no species of mustard that will grow into a tree. There is one, the Black Mustard which will generate a bush, but not quite a tree in whose branches birds perch. And Jesus knew that. So what was He talking about?

Perhaps Jesus was referring to another type of tree known as a mustard tree but which wasn't

mustard e.g rubber plants don't produce rubber – they have rubbery looking leaves but rubber trees are different. There is one such tree like this which is called the mustard tree which is nothing to do with rubber. It's also known as the toothbrush tree because it has fibrous roots that can be used as toothbrushes.

However Jesus was a great storyteller (because that's what parables are) and exaggerated for effect as good storytellers do e.g before you remove the speck from your brother's eye, take the great big log out of your own. Jesus knew that it was impossible for mustard to grow into a tree – and that was the point. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard that is capable of growing well beyond anything we can imagine in human terms. Why? Because it's God's kingdom.

From that point, yeast is something we can connect with too. Yeast cells are absolutely tiny – here is a microscope picture of them. But yet, the power of yeast is so great that a small amount can cause a little bit of dough to grow into a big loaf.

As the people of God sometimes we feel that we are trying to do something that seems beyond our reach. We live in an age where church is in decline, and never mind how hard we struggle, we don't seem to make an impact. And we think - "we're only small, what can we do? We can't do much".

But we are called to build the kingdom of God, where the power of the Spirit is such that a few of us can under His control and authority, build something we think is impossible. And we have a God who has an amazing track record in doing it. Who in Jesus' day would have thought that a Cross would be the greatest victory the world has ever known. To Jesus' enemies, death on a cross looked like defeat; yet Jesus is risen and is now King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The power of sin is defeated and the way of redemption is open.

Like the power of yeast in bread, the Spirit can work all the way through the dough that is the people of Felixstowe and build kingdom here in this town.

And better still, as individual people God can make us more than we thought we are or ever could be by the power of His Spirit. Christianity is so life transforming. But the life transforming power of Jesus is also one of the most forgotten and underused part of the faith and life of believers. Look at the seed and then the tree, the yeast and then the loaf and be amazed at what God can and will do.

And what does it take to see a transformation of lives and church? Just the few that are ready to accept the authority of God in their lives. Not authority in name only, not authority on a Sundays, not authority when it suits but authority when to be used by Jesus in His way, according to His will.

Just a little – can under the power of God, grow into something amazing for His glory

◆ The Treasure and Fine Pearl

Both of these, like the two previous ones show, two facets of the same theme. In the first a man is out walking and he stumbles on hidden treasure in a field. He isn't looking for it, but he chances his find. Now maybe you think he's a bit naughty not to tell the owner, but what he does is sell everything he has to buy the field so the treasure becomes his. I suspect most of us would do the same.

Or the pearl which is being looked for by a merchant. He finds the world's most valuable pearl and sells everything to have it. It's rather like the person who goes through a car boot sale and sees a picture going for as fiver and realises it's an old master worth hundreds of thousands. What does he do? He pays his fiver and makes himself rich by auctioning it at Christies!

One wasn't looking, one was. But both saw that there was something of immense value, so much that they were prepared to give up everything for it.

I'm not a business person, but I know that the worth of anything is determined by what people are prepared to pay for it. This is where these two parables link to the last tow. If we understand the mustard seed and the yeast, we realise what God has given us is of immense value – more than anything else we will ever see, do or experience. We are coming around the table in a few moments to remember how much God thought we were worth by giving up His own dear Son for us. What is Jesus worth to you?

When it comes to it, is Jesus worth everything we have to follow Him, to come under His authority? The implication is that when we find Christ, we don't find just another philosophy, just another religion, just another thing in life to do, but we find a Saviour who is worth more than life itself and as we think upon that eternity He promises to all those who trust Him and follow Him, we should be prepared to give up all that we have to follow.

And I'll be honest with you – that's difficult. I know because Rhiannon and I gave up our home when I trained for the ministry. We believed that God was calling us to do that because following Him is worth more than owning land and bank balances. And we found Him faithful as we followed Him.

The only thing I know is that when we release whatever we are hanging on to in order to follow Jesus, is worthless compared to the return in blessing that God makes in our lives and our eternity.

The problem is, we want Jesus, but we don't want to pay the price to follow Him and get the blessing. It's rather like inviting Him into our home but not letting Him get past the hall because we know we are going to have to clean up the lounge if we want Him in there and maybe we don't want to. But we clean the lounge, but we don't let Him in the kitchen in the dining room, because we haven't cleaned them up. Eventually we surrender that. But Jesus is only worth it when He is Lord of all of our lives. That's when the blessings flow. What are we holding out on Him this morning? What won't we surrender to Him because it's too costly?

◆ The Net

The final parable we have is the Net. It's all one thing to talk about what God can do in our lives and the need to follow Him whatever the cost. But that's of no use if we are not following Jesus in the first place. And that is where Jesus is going in this parable.

It's about a fisherman's net. Any trawler man will confirm this parable to us. When they trawl for fish, they get what they are fishing for as well as those they are not fishing for. What they don't want is thrown over the side, dead, and gets eaten by seagulls or sinks and gets eaten by sharks or whatever. The cod or herring or hake is landed – the rubbish ends up as something else's lunch.

I don't know if you remember the TV series *Dragnet*. It sometimes comes on to satellite TV and there was a film remake a few years back. It was about dedicated LA cop Joe Friday and was intended to portray police work as hard graft rather than glamorous or violent. The term *dragnet* was used by police (and still is) to mean a system of coordinated measures to apprehend criminals. In major incidents that's just what happens. And the idea is that the net draws everything relevant in so that it can be examined.

The message is this. The world consists of two sorts of people – those who follow Jesus – have accepted Him as Saviour and Lord – and those that haven't.

At the moment, the kingdom is extending in this world and day by day and week by week, people come to Jesus – but the world is still a mix of those who do and those who don't know Jesus. Come tonight and you'll see why, I hope, why that's the case.

But that isn't going to go on forever. There is a day coming, when Jesus returns when God is going to trawl the net in and divide those who are His from those who are not. For many it's one of those things Jesus spoke about that they have most difficulty with. Yet out of the three themes in this chapter, this is the one that gets most attention and I'll look more into it tonight.

It's a question of denial. It's nice to talk about mustard seeds and pearls but hell isn't such a nice subject. But the teaching of Matthew 13 is a very clear and unavoidable one for those who do not follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord, who have died without Him, are going to spend eternity without Him. And anywhere without God is hell and Jesus presents to us this real place – hell – an awful place.

You may say to me. "That's awful; how can a God of love send anyone to hell. Quite right – He'll never do anything like that lightly. *2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (ESV)*. God's desire is that no-one should perish, but that all should come to repentance. And to achieve this, He sent His own dear Son into this world to have His body broken and His blood shed so that no-one need ever perish. No-one need go to hell.

The choice is theirs: *not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance* that all should come. He's done His bit but we need to do ours – to turn away from doing things our way, accept God's offer of forgiveness of sins, accept His gift of eternal life and desire to follow Jesus. Yet there are still those thousands upon thousands of people who slip each day into eternity without Christ. God is a God of love. He did His bit – we need to do ours.

So as we come around the table this morning we have heard parables of hope – God can do big things out of our small church if we are prepared to yield to Him and follow Him. We have heard parables of challenge – this is what you were worth to Jesus, what is He worth to you? And finally – that challenge to all those who still aren't following Jesus – you have a decision to make. Thankfully as we read - *The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you* . God is patient with you. He's waiting for you to make the biggest decision of your life: will you follow Jesus. He's patient – but one day time is going to run about and the dragnet will close – where will you spend eternity?

Prayer.

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A People of the Kingdom 2

Matthew 13:24-30; 34-43

“Sowing your wild oats”. It’s an old saying to describe the way how young people often do things that are youthfully stupid. It’s an old agricultural term.

You’re all familiar with the fields of wheat that are planted in the fields around Walton and Trimley. Up until a couple of decades ago, British wheat was often poor quality because fields would be contaminated with a weed – the wild oat. Mixed with harvested grain, wild oat grain reduces the quality and therefore the value of the flour. The trouble is, the wild oats look just like the real crop until the wheat gets to about a foot high and the oats start to grow higher. But then it is too late to do anything. The crop is contaminated and the oat stunts the growth of the wheat so it’s less productive. These days farmers spray the crop with a chemical when it is young, which kills wild oats so you don’t see them that much.

The situation was the same in Jesus’ time. Some commentators suggest that the weed in question was a species of ryegrass called Bearded Darnel. Like wild oat, it grows with the wheat and is only obvious at about a foot high when the ear develops. In Jesus’ time the only solution was the one Jesus gives: you had to separate the weed by hand and burn them. So this explains the story Jesus’ told. Most people were familiar with it and would be very annoyed if someone had purposely sabotaged their fields by sowing wild oats – which did actually happen and the Romans actually had a law against this.

This morning we looked at the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven was not just heaven, but it is about God’s rule here. The problem is that the enemy is also active here as well sowing his own band of mayhem in this world. *“The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil.*

This is only one of two parables that Jesus actually explains, which is quite useful because this comes after the parable of the sower and the analogies that Jesus uses here aren’t the same as in the parable of the sower and that stops confusion. The Son of Man (Jesus) sows the seed and the sons of the kingdom are the seed he sows in this world – but the evil one has his sons sowed in the same world as well.

Just as in a field of wheat mixed with weeds, sometimes the weeds are obvious, but there are times when they are not. There are those in this world that ate plainly not of the kingdom, but there are some who look like Christians but just aren’t. Just because someone says they are a Christian doesn’t necessarily mean that they are. Actually, only God Himself who has his own are. That said we can usually know by their fruit who are His.

I believe God wants to challenge us with the clear message of this passage. First of all we need to realise that even though we may be under the rule of God, Jesus has placed us in a world where the evil one has sown and the majority around us are his product.

We could be either half full or half empty about this. We could lament about the state of the world: all the evil there is; all the grievous sins of men. Or we could see that we have been placed in the world to extend the kingdom. We are kingdom people who are here to spread kingdom rule. Arguably, the more unbelievers there are, the easier it should be because we’ve got a bigger choice of people to tell about Jesus!

Secondly, we must be aware that satan continues to sow weeds and tries to thwart the work of God. We must never think we've got there as a church because one of the problems is that satan sows right in amongst the wheat and we often don't find out the disastrous consequences until it's too late.

Jesus has told us that the enemy does this, so we should not be sleeping as to what the evil one does. We are at war don't forget it and we have an adversary committed to destroying everything that we have.

Jesus never promised us that we might become so good or so wise that no tares would ever grow in our wheat fields. Things happen in our world and in our lives that are beyond our power to prevent ~ and beyond our power to fix. No matter how hard we work or how good we may be, something or someone comes by while we are sleeping and sows tares in our field. Thomas Lane Butts (1997)

Thirdly, we need to understand and re-affirm the sad truth told in plain words here by Jesus, that this mix of wheat and tares is not going to continue. We saw this morning how God is going to close the net and here we have the same message in this parable – He's going to sort out the wheat from the tares.

The whole idea of judgement is just not popular these days. Because it sounds so "big stick"- like we don't like to portray that picture of God. It isn't thought by some as good PR to present a God who is angry – after all, He is a God of love isn't He? So the benefits of becoming a Christian are emphasised – the joy and the peace and all that. It's true but we would be less than balanced not to be plain that the human race, without Christ stands in a precarious position.

But God is a judge and will judge. It's something we all know but all need to be reminded of and Jesus lays it on pretty thick here:

The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Hell. Jesus clearly speaks about it here. It's not part of the parable; it's the explanation. If people are not trusting Christ they are lost and that's what happens to them. It isn't a joke, it's a real and unpleasant place. I know many good evangelical Christians who find problems with hell – a place of eternal torment reserved for the devil, his angels and all who have lived and died in rebellion to God. Whether it is literal flames or not, I'm not planning to be there to find out! It is a common view amongst some evangelicals today to see hell as being annihilation – people will just cease to be after the judgement.

But I've got to say, however unpalatable I find it, I cannot find that anywhere in scripture, just the words of Jesus of an horrific place because the presence, power and goodness of God just isn't there – a lake of fire is an appropriate picture, real or metaphorical.

As I said this morning – the God of love has already spoken, He's already done His part at massive cost to Himself – all we have to do is say yes and follow Him. Where's God being unloving or unjust to therefore remove all those who have rejected Him in life from His presence eternally? The choice was there.

The thing I most hope I'm wrong about as a Christian and as a Pastor is I hope I get into God's presence and find that I was wrong about what I told people about hell and it doesn't exist after all and everyone will be saved after all. But, like those who have come before me and those that like me look at the word of God today, all I can say is that the scriptures teach, that Jesus taught that there is "a heaven to be won and a hell to be shunned" (as the old preachers said. There is a real hell out there and God has already provided a way of escape for those who are already headed there and that was us once.

Yes – tell people of a God of love, of the wonders of what it means to be a Christian, of the promises of God and all the rest of it. But also use the words of Jonathan Edwards in one of his classic sermons "*Sinners in the hands of an angry God*"

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation: Let every one fly out of Sodom: "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."

Run for your lives! Run into the arms of the Saviour! It's a bit difference to saying – "Come and have some, love, joy, peace. Come and worship with us where it's all friendly and cosy". Strangely enough, the ministry of Edwards was characterised by revival – not just for a year or two, but on and off for decades.

I'm not one to miss a bit of levity in a serious message so here's a funny story for you – and true I think:

When the noted preacher Bishop Phillip Brooks was recovering from an illness and was denying himself to all visitors, Robert G. Ingersoll, the agnostic, called. The Bishop received him at once.

"I appreciate this very much," said Ingersoll, "but why do you see me when you deny yourself to your friends?"

"It is this way," said the Bishop. "I feel confident of seeing my friends in the next world, but this may be my last chance of seeing you."

That may be humorous, but Jesus still isn't kidding about hell and we need to take that in. If you're not trusting Jesus tonight, heaven is not for you – you need to accept Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. Run for your life!

If you are a Christian then know this, members of your family, your friends, your workmates, your neighbours who do not know Christ have the same fate. *42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.* They won't get away with it because of your good attendance at church, because they know you or because doubtless they are good folks. If they are not sons of the kingdom then hell awaits. Don't be fooled by the fact that everything seems OK now that God's dragnet will never be drawn in or the harvest will never come.

One of the things that brought me to Christ was that as we look at scripture, we see the promise of the return of Jesus. I may think that I have years to resolve questions of faith to myself, but what if God decides to call an end of the age now?

All of us here have publicly professed our faith in Christ I think. This is a serious message for us as God's people. We are tasked with telling the world about Jesus – where is our urgency. You see, to be "touchy feely" in our message may appeal to the modern mind, but it isn't quite the same as Jonathan Edward's "Run for your life!" Yet I believe that getting real with the word of God underlines that there should be an urgency in our message.

There's another issue that comes out of this passage that I also found interesting. Some people have said "why does God tolerate such evil people in our society. Why is there so much suffering and so much pain? Why doesn't He just strike down and remove the evil do that justice may prosper?" Actually, He has done something. He's placed His church here on earth to stand for Him in matters of justice. We are called to be people of mercy and to live justice. So what are we doing about it? A well known and much quoted saying is this *The only thing needed for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing (Edmund Burke)*. So before we accuse God, what have we done about it? We may be small, but under God's power, submitted to Him, we could and should be making a difference!

That being an aside, there is an answer to that question in this passage: *28 "An enemy did this," he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 29 "No," he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" The answer as to why God doesn't just rip out evil people is that it will cause damage to those who are the ones who are the force for God – God's own people. Whilst the wheat and the tares are in the world together, there is an opportunity for God's work to grow and His church to prosper and thrive.*

Therefore, God calls us to take that opportunity to prosper and thrive – to see the opportunities that are there to serve Him, to bring people to Christ: but to also realise there is a heaven to be won and a hell to be shunned and start to inject urgency in our message. We are a seed, let's by the power of the Spirit grow into a tree.

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