

WEEK 2: SATURDAY

'An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.' I used to think that that old Sunday-school definition of a parable was a harmless comment. I now think it's more likely to be dangerous nonsense. Jesus didn't tell parables to provide friendly little illustrations of abstract theology. He told parables because what he was doing was so different, so explosive, and so dangerous, that the only way he could talk about it was to use stories. These are earthly, and sometimes heavenly, stories with an emphatically earthly meaning. They explain the full meaning not of distant timeless truths, but of what Jesus was up to then and there. This is what is going on, they say, if only you had eyes to see. Or, indeed, as Jesus frequently says, ears to hear.

Jesus' parables invite the hearer to look at the world, and particularly to look at Jesus himself, in a whole new way. You can see the force of this if you imagine for a moment the standard objection to Jesus' announcement of God's kingdom, from that day to this. 'Of course God's kingdom hasn't come,' say the objectors (including many devout Jews, to this day). 'Read the newspapers! Look out of the window! If God's kingdom had really come, the world wouldn't still be in such a mess!'

And of course they are right — at one level. If 'God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven' means the complete abolition of all evil, and ultimately of death itself, then of course it is not yet here. But — as Jesus insisted in the passage we looked at yesterday — if Jesus was indeed winning the victory over the oldest and deadliest enemy, liberating people who had been completely taken over by the forces and powers of darkness, and if he was doing so in the power of God's spirit, then God's sovereign, saving, healing power was indeed being let loose into the world in a new, unprecedented fashion. And the sharpest way of describing that was to say, 'then God's kingdom has come upon you'.

But another way of saying the same thing, more obliquely perhaps but ultimately more effectively, was to tell stories. Jesus told a great many, and lots of them were different ways of coming at the same point: that yes, the full victory, the final abolition of evil, still remained in the future, but no, that didn't mean that nothing was really happening, that God's kingdom wasn't really present in some way or other.

The stories that make this point most effectively include the two little parables in verses 31, 32 and 33. A grain of mustard seed is tiny. But when it grows, it turns into a large shrub, and the birds can nest in it. What is Jesus saying? 'Don't despise the small beginnings of the kingdom. What I (Jesus) am doing is planting seeds. They may not look much at the moment. But they're going to grow. And when they do, then you'll be surprised at the birds that come to roost.' Many people have detected here a reference to foreign nations coming to share in Israel's privileges.

The same point emerges from the parable of the yeast. I once had a breadmaking machine, and I never tired of the apparent miracle by which a tiny amount of yeast made the whole loaf rise. In the same way, the kingdom-work that Jesus is doing may be small and insignificant. In his whole life he can't have travelled more than a few hundred miles. He met a comparatively small number of people — though considerably more than an ordinary Galilean villager might expect to meet — and, so far as we know, never went and preached before kings or rulers. He wrote no book; television hadn't been invented, so he was never invited to appear on chat shows or

I'm a Celebrity. And yet the yeast that he stirred into the loaf — the kingdom-work he did in a very short time in a very small place — has leavened the loaf of the whole world. Almost everybody now dates world history in relation to his birth. Even those who do their best to ignore his message still have to refer to him sooner or later. His way of love, forgiveness, humility and service has woven itself into the fabric of many societies, so that even where it's ignored people know that something happened in his life and death that changed the world.

There is more. The yeast hasn't completed its work. The plant that has grown from the mustard seed has further still to go. That's why today's other pair of little parables still matter. The other main message of this chapter is that Jesus is looking for people to sign on, people who are prepared to take his kingdom-movement forward in their own day. Here the stories are about someone finding something of enormous value and selling everything they possess in order to buy it. This could be heard in a rather selfish fashion: if I give up everything else for Jesus I will have a wonderful spiritual life. That is no doubt true, but the kingdom of heaven is far, far more than 'me and my spiritual life' now and salvation in the end. The kingdom of heaven is about God's rule sweeping through the sad, decaying world we live in. That is a goal worth working for! That is a vocation to beat all others. Give up your other treasures, Jesus is saying, and buy this one. Give up the small collection of pearls which have meant so much to you. Here is the biggest, finest one you could ever imagine.

Jesus still holds out that clear, almost teasing invitation to us today. His kingdom is still growing, still meeting sharp opposition to be sure, but still making its way in the world. To be part of that work is the greatest privilege you could imagine.

TODAY

Lord Jesus, tell us again the story of your kingdom, and draw us to follow you, to find the treasure, to help in the work of making that kingdom grow.