

27 July 2014

Readings Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, Romans 8:26-39

Some years ago a friend in Macandrew Bay showed me the artichokes they were growing – they are quite large plants with long stalks and distinctive jagged edged leaves, quite ornamental, really. And I remembered that I had once had artichokes vinaigrette and rather enjoyed it. So when a plant with what looked like the same large jagged edged leaves appeared in my garden, I thought “Oh good – this might be an artichoke” and I left it to get on with growing.

And grow it did, with quite thick tall woody stalks, and the leaves grew ever larger, and then the flowers appeared with lots of seeds in them. No artichokes, though.

I guess by this stage I should have realised that this plant was not going to produce anything edible, and dealt with it before the seeds matured and were scattered, but I didn't – and for years afterwards the jagged-edged leaves appeared all over the garden. This was definitely a weed, and like most weeds, once it had established itself it was difficult to get rid of.

The mustard bush is not a garden plant – it's a weed in the Middle East, turning up where it had not been intended.

A mustard seed cannot be spotted hiding in a bag of grain, because it is so tiny, and so it gets sown inadvertently,

in the midst of whatever other crop is being sown. And then it flourishes, growing into a large unwanted plant, taking up space in the field. And it provides a place for the birds of the air to come and nest – which is not necessarily what you want to encourage in the midst of your crop either – that's why there are scarecrows.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, Jesus said.

Not like a cedar of Lebanon, not like the mighty tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (recorded in Daniel 4) whose “foliage was beautiful, its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed.”¹

The Message translation we read says “The kingdom of heaven is like a pinenut” - and in a land that relies heavily on *pinus radiata* for export earnings, that seems like a much more impressive and productive analogy. But I was in Queenstown a fortnight ago, where wilding pines have become a scourge on the landscape because they flourish and spread and transform, in ways that we do not necessarily want. So they are declared to be a pest, an invasive species, a noxious weed.

The kingdom of heaven is like.... something hidden and unexpected and transformative and all-pervasive. Something subversive. Something invasive. Something that it is very hard to get rid of....

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast – and we like the smell of baking bread and the lightness of a well-risen loaf. But the leavening agent of Jesus' day wasn't yeast from a handy jar or packet. Rather, it was leaven, produced by setting aside a portion of leftover bread until it began to spoil. And it was a tricky business, working with that sort of leaven.

Not spoiled enough, and it is worthless and cannot make the dough rise. Allowed to spoil too long, it not only ruins the loaf, but can cause food poisoning. Leaven can be fatal. No wonder it was often used as an image of evil, of corruption, of something unclean and unholy. At the Passover the house is swept to ensure that every scrap of leaven was removed.

But Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven - hidden in enough flour to make dozens of loaves of bread, enough to feed a hundred people”

The Roman empire was the all-powerful, all-pervasive, all-controlling political reality of Jesus' day. It was an empire that held sway over the known world, bring the Roman peace in the wake of its all-conquering legions, controlling all that had been brought within its reach. We catch glimpses of what Roman occupation meant for the people of Jesus' time – soldiers who demanded that you carry their pack for a mile, tax collectors who imposed Roman taxes, and took their cut on top of that, army commanders in every town, crosses outside city walls. And the Romans made sure that everyone was aware of their might with army

1 Daniel 4:11,12

processions full of glittering armour and flapping banners and tramping sandals, all the accoutrements of power and majesty

The kingdom of heaven is like – what? - like the kingdom of Rome? Like the puppet kingdom of the Herods?

“Lord, is now the time when you are going to establish your kingdom?” the disciples asked Jesus on occasion. “Let us sit on thrones – with you. Let us get the chance at last to exercise the sort of power we see others exercising over us”

But that is not the kingdom Jesus is announcing. The kingdom of heaven is like the weeds that grow where they are not expected, like the yeast that transforms flour into dough. Like ordinary everyday things that are so small and insignificant, that can't even be seen while they are doing their work, but which produce results far beyond their size and transform the whole environment wherever they are.

The kingdom of heaven is an alternative - a radical transforming totally different alternative –to the norms and patterns of the kingdom of Rome, the kingdom of Herod, the kingdoms and powers and authorities of this world.

What else is the kingdom of heaven like? Like a tenant farmer, ploughing land that doesn't belong to him, and finding great treasure hidden there – which he doesn't declare, honourably, or take to the owner, but rather hides again, and then gathers together everything he has, liquidates all his assets, and buys the field.

All that he has had in the past,

all that he has scrimped and scraped to save, all that he had gathered up, and (if he's like us) all that gives him his worth and identity – all that he sells so that he can buy the field and secure the treasure for himself.

And in case we thought that was an isolated case, Jesus repeats it – the merchant dealing in pearls sells them all to be able to buy the one pearl of great value.

And also, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that catches every kind of fish. This is a dragnet, thrown into the sea and catching everything in its path – not just fish but bycatch too, and probably come flotsam and jetsam as well –

because Jesus doesn't actually specify fish. He just says it catches “all kinds of things”. There's an extravagant lack of discrimination here, no careful judgment (that comes at the end of the age, and it's not ours but God's, through the angels), no standards to be met or rules to abide by. The kingdom of heaven includes all sorts of people, not just the ones like me, not just the ones I agree with.

God's empire is absolutely unlike the Roman Empire.

It's pervasive rather dominant – it's like a pungent weed that takes over everything.

It's not mighty and majestic and noble in the sense of imperial – yet it cannot be domesticated.

It is universal in scope – fish of every kind were caught.

It doesn't just happen – sometimes you have to search for it like a merchant intent on finding the best pearls.

It's risky and people do amazing things to be part of it – like selling all that you have to buy a field for heaven's sake! ²

So where do we see the kingdom of heaven? Not primarily in the church (though the church should be a signpost of the kingdom, maybe a foretaste) but in the world, in the field or the dough or the marketplace or the sea.

Where do we see the kingdom of God?

Where transformation happens, where old habits and expectations and assumptions are turned upside down, where there is shelter for all comers, and nourishment for a multitude, and caution thrown to the wind with great joy, and a gathering in of all sorts.

And if that doesn't sound comfortable or safe or respectable, that's because it's not.

Think of what Paul faced - hardship and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and peril and sword and death³. It was in the midst of such suffering, when there were no words to pray but only sighs and groans too deep for words, that Paul could “Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”.

These are words of comfort for the afflicted - but we need to recognise that the kingdom of heaven as Jesus tells it is an affliction for the comfortable. So maybe our discomfort, when it is our cherished assumptions or our long-held positions or our unexamined habits that are being challenged, is also a sign of the kingdom of heaven, as the mustard seed grows, as the leaven lightens the dough, as the treasure lies waiting to be discovered, as the net hauls in us along with all the other things found in the sea of the world.