

Year A, Proper 17

Genesis 29: 15-28

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Moving house is supposed to be one of the most stressful things in life, but I am not entirely sure that is always true – of course Markie may well disagree vehemently, but perhaps she could do that later and not now. As moves go, our move into West Linton was relatively stress-free, partly because it was a short chain and no mortgages were involved, which made a huge difference, especially in the current climate.

At the same time, we both feel God was definitely in it all, because with only 10 weeks between the first viewing and moving it meant that nothing could afford to go wrong. We feel strongly that Windlestraw was and Littlegarth now is for God's purposes.

The most stressful thing about it probably only having a few weeks to decide what we could take and what had to go after more than 28 years, giving we were moving into a house half the size. Mercifully, we got the big calls about furniture just about right – but it's another story when it comes to pictures and knickknacks.

But as you do the sorting out, you inevitably come across things you didn't even know you had, in my case two job references from my gap year more than 50 years ago. Why on earth had I kept them? I have no idea, but some things you just can't afford to be sentimental about.

But what I have found particularly interesting is that, although much of our furniture is totally familiar, because it is now in a different setting and in some cases in a different role, it actually feels quite new while at the same time making it feel just like home.

Now that is a long-winded way of getting round to the five parables in today's Gospel reading, which are all about the kingdom of God. Tom Wright argues persuasively that Matthew, in the way he shapes his Gospel, sets it in the context of the old and the familiar world of Israel and its history, yet at the same time the content is very new and sometimes unsettling.

Let's take the first two, the parable of the mustard seed and of the leaven hidden in the bread. At a time when the Church is retrenching rapidly in the Western world, it's hard to believe that the kingdom of God is flourishing. Yet what Jesus is saying is that much of what is happening in the kingdom is hidden, that that is God's way of doing things. I wonder if the missionaries who went to Africa more than a century ago to share Good News could ever have imagined that the roles would now be reversed with missionaries coming to us because that is where the Gospel needs to be heard, that the mustard seed they planted all those years ago has exploded into life, spreading like an invasive weed.

Now I'm not sure that mustard seeds are grown much here in the United Kingdom, so perhaps for us a more meaningful image would be a colourful ivy. Planted against the wall of house, it is at first insignificant, yet, suddenly it's covering the whole side of the house – a haven for insects and small birds.

Or take leaven, which Jesus describes as hidden in the dough. To his audience of course, leaven was regarded as unclean or even evil. Unlike the convenience of dried yeast, in those days you had to let the leaven rot sufficiently to make the next batch. Again, like the mustard seed, it does its work unseen – until suddenly you have a nice risen loaf, that serves its purpose, just like the mustard seed.

The kingdom starts, Jesus says, with small beginnings and time is needed to see the full effects, but we will see them. Take the abolition of slavery in Britain – that started with the efforts of one man, William Wilberforce, who died coincidentally 190 years ago yesterday. A committed Christian, Wilberforce took up the cause of the abolition of slavery in his late 20s. Three days before he died at the age of almost 74, he heard that the legislation to abolish slavery in most of the British Empire had finally got through Parliament.

The parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl sit together and are perhaps the most challenging for us. In the first instance, someone finds the treasure and then buries it in a field and sells everything he has so that he can buy the field and dig up the treasure to claim it for himself. In the second instance, the trader knows what he is looking for and waits until he finds it and then goes and sells everything he has to buy the pearl.

The immediate point of both parables is the two men went all-in to buy something they regarded as almost beyond price, even if their families,

neighbours, and friends thought they were barking mad. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like, says Jesus. And the question he is asking each of us is Are you all-in? Do you believe that the Kingdom is worth having, even if it costs you everything.

The Genesis reading is interesting in that context. Strip out the patriarchal and polygamous nature of society in Jacob's time and Laban's deceit, which is, amusingly, a case of the biter bit as far as Jacob is concerned, and at its root it is a story of how Jacob goes all-in to have Rachel as his wife. He's already spent seven years working for his future father-in-law and suddenly finds himself married to the wrong woman and accepts another seven years hard labour because he thinks the prize is well worth it. So it is with the Kingdom.

I've said in another context that Jesus reminds us that God is actually pleased to give us the Kingdom, another reason to go all-in. And that also ties in with that wonderful passage from Romans that C/S read for us, where Paul, who definitely went all-in, says nothing can separate us from the love of God. And he reminds us that God works for the good of those who love him, which of course doesn't mean that all our problems will magically disappear, but we shouldn't forget that it also doesn't mean that the Kingdom will necessarily look like we think it should look like.

The final parable has Jesus comparing the kingdom to a catch of fish, where good and bad are caught alike and where the sorting will be done by the angels once the catch has been landed on shore. Its counterpart is the parable in last week's Gospel, which we didn't look at because we were celebrating the feast of Mary Magdalene, about the wheat and the weeds.

Now, granted the weeds were planted by an enemy of the farmer, but, Jesus says, the labourers are not to throw out the weeds as soon as they appear, but rather what was weed and what was wheat would be decided at the time of harvest by the reapers.

Markie and I went to Guildford Cathedral last Sunday and the preacher told a wonderful story relating to that. A Protestant in Northern Ireland got to know a Catholic priest quite well, and the priest invited him to go to his church for Mass. The church was packed and the Protestant, the only one there apparently, sat at the back and stayed in his seat when it came to taking communion because he knew it would be considered inappropriate for him to do so that in that setting and he did not want to embarrass the priest. But the priest saw him sitting there and chose to walk the length of the church to give

him communion – having decided that it wasn't for him to decide who was wheat and who was weed. A lesson for us all in all sorts of church contexts, I think.

Interestingly, all these parables have one common theme – waiting. The kingdom of God is absolutely worth waiting for, in fact it is worth everything. We have to trust that God is active in building his kingdom even when much of that activity is hidden and out sight. Not only that, we also need to accept that and that the harvest will be ready when God says it is and not when we think it should be. His timing is not our timing.

Our job is to think how we can plant our equivalent of the mustard seed, how we can leaven the dough as our contribution to growing the kingdom.

The similes used by Jesus reflected his audience – farmers, fishermen, gardeners, housewives, labourers, and traders – and I doubt he would use the same sort of similes today.

So, I want to finish by leaving you with a challenge to consider over the next few days and hopefully you will be willing to share next week or even later this morning what the Kingdom of Heaven is in your context and life experience. In other words, echoing Jesus's words, The Kingdom of Heaven is like..... Amen