

Good morning everyone. Welcome. It is wonderful to be here together today, to meet together to worship God.

We come from many different backgrounds and many different cultures, yet together we are one, we are joined together and that is very special.

As I begin this morning I will pray

Prayer

Today we are continuing our series on the kingdom of God.

We will be looking at Luke 13: verses 18-21

Therefore he (that is Jesus) said, "What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed which a man took and threw into his garden. And it grew up and became a tree and the birds of the sky nested in its branches."

Again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until the whole was leavened."

The inspired word of God

Initial reactions to passage

I don't know about you, but my initial reaction when I read this passage was that it was really quite short and had a slightly weird feeling to it. The images used are ones that I don't normally use.

The kingdom of God is compared to things that I normally would not compare the kingdom of God to.

It starts off with mustard. Well I sometimes put a little bit of that on my sandwiches when I am having ham around Christmas time.

But we don't grow mustard in our garden. So we don't have a mustard bush and we don't have mustard seeds.

And leaven or yeast, well I know that is in bread. It makes it rise. We keep some yeast in our kitchen at home. But it still seems a little strange to compare the kingdom of God to something like that.

So I was left thinking, well how is a mustard seed and some yeast like the kingdom of God. What are those images about. To compare the kingdom of God to those things seems to be a bit of a stretch.

Maybe this Sunday's message will be an extra short one.

Digging a little deeper.

So I became curious and started digging a little deeper, looking at these things in more detail. And when I did I discovered that there were things there that I had missed on my first glance, but they were also things that were even more confusing.

Mustard seed

Take the mustard seed. Well what is a mustard seed like? Why use that?

At the time of Jesus, the main impression people had about mustard seeds was that they were really really small.

If people were going to talk about something that was really tiny they would refer to a mustard seed.

They had sayings like

No mustard-seed slips from the hands of the miser.

I will do a remix of that. It would be like saying

That person is so tight with his money and what he owns, that he even knows how many mustard seeds he has. Do you get the picture?

Jesus also talked about just needing faith as big as a mustard seed.

So mustard seeds were known to be really tiny. They were used as an example of the smallest thing you could think of.

But then like all seeds, the mustard seed grows. And this seed when it was thrown into the garden, it grew into a tree, a shrub. Since that is what happens with seeds.

The tree, the shrub that it grew into would have been about as high as this ceiling. And birds of the sky nested in its branches. And Jesus said that is what the kingdom of God is like.

Expect....

But this parable does contain something unexpected and a bit confusing.

In New Zealand if we talk about someone important who is no longer with us. We will say a mighty Totara has fallen in the forest. A large, impressive tree that provides shelter and security is no longer there. It has fallen.

Now with people in Jesus time, they did not have the Totara, but they did have the cedar tree. And that was often the tree that they used for images like we use for the Totara.

There is even a prophecy in Ezekiel chapter 17 where God talks about the rebirth of Israel. The image is one of God planting a sprig of Cedar.

And Ezekiel 17 verse 23 says.

*On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.*¹

A noble cedar, that is the sort of tree that we would expect the kingdom of God to be like. A tree that grows to over 30 meters tall, a tree that can be used as a mast for a sailing ship.

A tree that is majestic, noble, towering high in the forest. A tree that birds nest in. That is what we expect, that is what I expect.

But instead Jesus uses the image of a mustard shrub.

That is unexpected, surprising and a little confusing.

Yeast

And then there is the parable of the yeast. The kingdom of God being like yeast or leaven that was taken and hidden in three measures of flour.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Eze 17:23). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

And that again starts with something small and easily overlooked.

Yeast does not look special at all. It is like grains or powder.

And the yeast was taken and hidden in three measures or three sata of flour. In case you are wondering, that is a lot of flour. It is a commercial sized sack of flour. About 22 kg or about 160 cups worth of flour. That would make enough bread to give a good feed to about 150 people.

And that small amount of yeast is hidden in all that flour and yet it leavens all of it, the whole lot rises.

And that is what the kingdom of God is like. That is what Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God too.

Expectations yeast....

And this parable also contains things that are unexpected and a bit confusing.

There were expectations about yeast. Yeast was usually used to describe things that were negative. Things that were bad.

For the Jewish people when they celebrated the feast of the Passover, for that day and the seven days after it, everybody ate unleavened bread - bread without yeast in it. That was part of the instructions that they were given.

Before that feast, even today, Jewish people will go through their houses, they will clean out their cupboards. They will search for anything with yeast in it. And anything that they find they will get rid of or they will pass ownership of it to someone who is not a Jew. For them, that is a picture of getting rid of anything that is impure.

So yeast for them was used to describe things that are impure, things that are negative.

And yet here, Jesus is using yeast in a positive way. The kingdom of God was compared to yeast. This is a positive parable used by Jesus to describe the kingdom of God. It comes straight after another positive parable. The commentaries all agree that this parable must be interpreted in a positive way and that means Jesus was using yeast as a positive symbol, quite different to the way that it was normally thought about.

That is unexpected, surprising and a little confusing.

Unexpected takes by surprise....

So both parables have that unexpected and surprising twist to them. Using images that would not have been expected.

Both parables start with something exceedingly small, but in the end, something that ends up having an influence that is much greater than we might expect.

Both parables use unexpected images of the kingdom of God, symbols like the mustard tree and yeast, symbols that are not normally used.

Yet the mustard seed grows into a mustard tree. And even if it is not a cedar, it is still a tree that provides space for birds to nest, even a mustard tree provides stability and peace, a place of shade and shelter.

It looks different from a cedar, the kingdom of God looks different to what we might expect.

And it started with a minuscule mustard seed, thrown into the garden. And then there is the yeast, well that makes the whole sack of flour rise. It influences and has an impact that is far greater than what we might expect. And the bread from it, well that would feed a whole crowd of people.

Ref to story before...

So the images are starting to make sense, but to really understand why Jesus used these parables we need to look at where Luke has placed them.

There is a story immediately before them in the gospel of Luke and these parables link backwards to that story...

Luke 13:18 starts with a "therefore", or a "so Jesus said". Jesus was using these parable to help teach and explain things that had just happened.

Crippled woman...

And what had happened involved a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. For all that time she was bent over and could not straighten.

It was on the Sabbath that Jesus saw her. He was teaching in a Synagogue and she was there as well, she was listening to Jesus.

Jesus saw her, he called her forward and Jesus had compassion for her and he said to her,

Woman, you are set free from your sickness and then he laid hands on her.

The woman was cured immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God. Jesus, with the power of God that was working through him, had healed her.

But it had happened on the Sabbath.

And so the leaders of the synagogue, the place where they were meeting were furious. In their eyes, curing someone was work, Jesus had cured her on the Sabbath. So therefore Jesus had worked on the Sabbath.

One of the ten commandments says

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

So that seems clear. Healing someone is work. You are not to work on the Sabbath. So healing someone on the Sabbath is wrong.

That was the usual interpretation that the Jewish leaders had. That was their expectation. That was why they were cross and challenged Jesus.

But in response Jesus replied to those leaders.

“You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this

woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

Jesus replied, pointing out to those leaders that they had a blindspot.

Do you know what a blindspot is?

Well let me tell you a story.

I learnt to drive in Auckland. I had driving lessons, I learnt to check my mirrors, I got my licence. Then one day as a young driver with just a little experience I was driving on the motorway in Auckland.

There were not many cars, and I needed to change lanes, moving from the centre lane to the lane on the left. I checked my rear vision mirror, I looked left, I could not see any cars, so I indicated and started to change lanes.

Then all of a sudden there was a loud horn tooting at me from my left, from behind me. There was a car there that I had not seen. So my heart skipped a beat, I quickly I steered my car back into its lane and continued there for quite a while until my heart rate dropped back to something approaching normal. And then before I change lanes I did a really really thorough check.

You see there was a car in my blind spot. It was in a place that I could not see when looking in my mirrors. I did not know it was there, I was totally unaware of it, and because of that I just missed having a bad accident.

Those leaders thought that they were obeying every dot in the law. They thought that they were obeying every last detail. Doing what God wanted them to do. But they had a blindspot. There was

something that was incredibly important that they were unaware of. They missed the spirit of the law, what God intended the command about the Sabbath to be about.

And so those leaders had worked out how to look after animals that they owned. Animals need water, they need someone to care for them. So the animals were cared for like they should have been cared for.

But there were people who were in need as well and those same leaders did not show compassion and care for those people. They had a blindspot. A blindspot about why God had made the Sabbath.

Yes, you could say what Jesus did was work, but you could also say that it was someone being set free. And being set free is a wonderful thing to happen on any day of the week. When we take a step backwards and see the big picture, we can see that what Jesus did made sense and that it did follow the spirit of the law, it did follow what God intended and it was a good thing to happen.

Now sometimes we too have a set of assumptions about how God works. They might be different to those of the Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus, but they are there all the same. They have been built over the years and we might not even be aware of them.

We have our own blind spots.

It might be about God only speaking through certain people or in certain locations. But God speaks to us all, God uses us all. It might be about God only doing things according to rules that we put out for God to obey.

But God is bigger and more creative than what we might expect.
God uses unexpected things, and God works in unexpected ways
We need to be prepared for that.

That is what the kingdom of God is like.

That is why the parables have a tiny mustard seed, almost
insignificant growing into a mustard shrub, providing shelter and
stability for the birds of the air.

That is why the parables use that unexpected image of yeast, causing
a whole sack of flour to rise.

That is why Jesus carried out an unexpected healing on the Sabbath
The kingdom of God is full of unexpected things, it is full of things
that challenge our assumptions about how God works.

The kingdom of God is full of things that challenge those blind spots
that we have.

The unexpected things like God being here present with us in
Flaxmere today. This church is not a cathedral. There are not 5000
people worshipping here. But God is here, God is working.

That is what the kingdom of God is like....

God does things that are unexpected and moving in ways that
continue to challenge us and our assumptions. that is what the
kingdom of God is like.

Lord open our minds so that we might see glimpses of your kingdom.
And may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is
in heaven.

Amen..