

Sermon for 26th July 2026, Year A, Pentecost 9, Proper 12

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Sermon

When we read all the stories about Jesus, he seems to spend a huge amount of time trying to explain to his friends what this thing called the Kingdom of heaven is like, that he thinks everyone should want to be part of.

Sometimes he calls it the kingdom of heaven; other times he calls it the Kingdom of God - in the first century, the word 'heaven' was a polite way of saying 'God.' But then, as now, everyone still really struggles to understand what Jesus is talking about.

Is he talking about a spiritual place, often imagined as being up there in the sky, somewhere we only get to when we die? That's the way we usually think of heaven, isn't it? A reward we might get later, if we're really good, like children getting presents at Christmas.

Wondering: *I wonder what ideas you have about the kingdom of heaven. What do you imagine Jesus is talking about? Talk to your neighbour for a couple of minutes.*

All these are very sensible guesses about what the kingdom of heaven is like. But the thing is, whenever Jesus starts trying to describe the kingdom of heaven, he ends up talking about some very earthy stuff indeed!

In our Gospel reading, Jesus has four goes at explaining heaven. It's like a mustard seed, he says, that starts small and then grows into a huge bush. It's like yeast, that a baker uses to make the bread dough rise and go fluffy. It's like treasure

hidden in a field, and it's so important to get that treasure that you'd buy the whole field! And it's like a beautiful pearl, so gorgeous that it's worth selling everything else you have, to be able to afford it.

All of these are very down-to-earth descriptions, aren't they? When Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven he talks about everyday things like a shrub just outside the window, or an ingredient in the kitchen, or something buried in the garden by your house. Mustard Seeds, Yeast, and Hidden Treasure.

I mean, he could have talked about clouds and angels and harps and so on, or an orderly row of perfect tulips, or a group of people sitting in pews wearing their Sunday best, but instead he describes heaven in terms of mustard seeds and yeast.

Now, mustard seeds are really tiny; they're only one millimetre across. If you had a tower of mustard seeds all sitting on top of each other, well, of course they'd fall over, but if you *could* stand them end on end, you'd still need over one thousand seven hundred of them to be as tall as me. That's a lot of seeds!

In Jesus' day, no one really thought much of mustard bushes. They were a bit of a weed. The tiny seeds would get into batches of useful seed like wheat and then end up growing big leaves really, really fast, and putting all the wheat into the shade if you didn't find them fast enough. Even worse, as they grow, they stop other seeds from germinating,

So, when Jesus describes heaven as being like a tiny mustard seed, perhaps what he's saying is heaven is a place of humble people, who maybe don't feel like they're worth very much, but actually when they get planted in good soil, they grow quickly in kindness and compassion, and then their big hearts can provide shelter and look after others in need, just like the big branches of the mustard bush giving shelter for the birds.

The yeast is similar. In Jesus' day the only way to get yeast was from a mixture of flour and water left exposed to the air, or from yesterday's leftover dough, or from fermenting beer. Not the most attractive stuff on the face of it. But, without the yeast, your fresh bread would be all flat and hard – no fluffiness at all. Who likes nice fluffy bread? I certainly do!

So, I think Jesus is telling us that heaven is something that might seem useless in a world that values fame and wealth, but if it's given space to grow, heaven spreads through churches and families and communities and makes them fluffy, kind, compassionate and full of love.

In Jesus's two other descriptions of the kingdom of heaven, he focuses on how precious it is, and how it's worth giving up everything else for it, even loads of money.

This is a choice we also need to make every day. Are our lives focused on being as personally wealthy as possible, or do we want to be part of God's kingdom where everyone is loved, and understood, and accepted. If we spend all our time trying to get more money, the chances are we're not noticing the treasure that is the kingdom of heaven all around us!

So, I think Jesus is always trying to help us see the world differently, to notice that this beautiful community of love that he calls 'the kingdom of heaven' is already here! The whole world is already full of God's wonder and beauty and love, just waiting for us to discover it in all the most ordinary places. Maybe even in the person sitting next to you!

Thomas Merton, who was an American monk in the twentieth century, once tried to explain how spiritually beautiful ordinary people were, just walking around doing mundane things like going shopping. "It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts... the person that each one is in God's eyes," he said, before adding, "If only they could all see themselves as they really are.

There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

This is what it’s like when someone finds heaven in the middle of their own ordinary situation. Then it changes their life!

So, heaven isn’t something that’s far, far away, up in the clouds, only available when we die. It’s something that’s all around us, even in everyday things that we might not notice, or which we might think are rubbish to throw away. It starts in the humblest of people and places, but it spreads and grows and becomes a blessing to everyone who encounters it.

Hidden within our ordinary lives, the kingdom of heaven grows up from tiny beginnings in unexpected ways, until what we thought we knew and understood is transformed and turned into love by our incredible, surprising, wonderful God.

So, here’s something else for you to ponder for the rest of the day. If *you* had to come up with a description for the kingdom of heaven like Jesus did, I wonder how *you’d* describe it?