

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

What's it like? What is the kingdom of heaven like? What would you say the kingdom of heaven is like? Is it a *Shangri-La* amidst the misty clouds of the mountain heights? Is it beautiful mansions, palaces and country estates? Are the streets paved with gold? In the 13th chapter of the gospel according to Matthew Jesus gives us picture parables of the kingdom of heaven. Two weeks ago we had the Parable of the Sower. Last Sunday we heard the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds. Today, we have six parables, six about what the kingdom of heaven is like. What's it like? It's like a mustard seed. It's like yeast mixed in with the flour. It's like treasure hidden in a field. It's like one pearl of great value. It's like a net catching all sorts of things. It's like the householder's treasures – old and new. What?

Do you get it? That's what Jesus asks his disciples. And they say, "Yes. We get it." Hmm. What do you think? Do they get it? Then, the very next thing is Jesus coming to his hometown of Nazareth and being rejected by the hometown folks. What's the kingdom of heaven like?

What's the wisdom on the kingdom? According to our first reading for today, Solomon received a special dose of wisdom. He certainly became a powerful king. He had hundreds of wives, many of the marriages sealing alliances with foreign powers. He used those alliances to weal and deal with a Machiavellian style of political wisdom. He was ruthless. He ruled with an iron fist. He not only enslaved conquered peoples, but his own people. He built a powerful army, inscripting the citizens to fight and die in war after war. Such was his Solomonic wisdom. Which presents us with a poignant contrast to the wisdom of Jesus in the parables of the kingdom.

Do we get it? I wonder. As your pastor-preacher-scribe, trained in the kingdom, yet with some degree of trepidation, I endeavor to bring out treasures new and old. The scriptures suggest that the kingdom is hard to put into words. Jesus uses word-images, parables. In fact, 13:34 says, "indeed he said nothing to them without a parable." Mustard seed, baker's yeast, treasure hidden in a field . . . what in the world? What, for heaven's sake, do these parables tell us about the kingdom of God?

Apparently, the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven, is a mystery. O.K. Something small, like a mustard seed, can grow into something big. God's kingdom comes hidden and humble, inconspicuous and down-to-earth, not with Klieg lights and trumpet fanfare, but unpretentious and modest. Ah, but all sorts of birds nest there. Not just the dove of Israel, but all sorts of birds. The kingdom welcomes all, makes room for all, includes all, and is busy turning the world upside-down. At least that's what Jesus' parables suggest.

For example, according to Jewish teaching no one is to plant a mustard seed. In ancient Palestine, the mustard was generally considered a weed. It could become invasive. In *kosher* language, it was unclean. Yet, it was used as a condiment and as medicine. Something so modest and *unkosher* serves as a sign of the kingdom of God.

Yeast or leaven in the ancient world was generally a symbol of moral corruption creeping into our world. It's a mold. How can it serve as a sign of God's kingdom? Yeast hidden or concealed by a woman in some 50 lbs of flour, fermenting, begins to change things, raising a large amount of bread dough.

Treasures new and old. Something new arising from the old. Jesus says don't put new wine in old wineskins. The skins burst, the wine is spilled and wasted. Put new wine into fresh wineskins. In the midst of the "old" Torah and Prophets, the kingdom of God is doing new and surprising things – hidden like yeast in the bread dough.

So, this hidden yeast is actually like a hidden treasure. Sell what you have for the sake of this treasure. Risk everything. Burn the bridges behind you. The kingdom of God is the pearl of great price, just a modest lump of calcium carbonate made by a mollusk on the floor of the sea. Who would think it? So it is with God's kingdom – so modest and unassuming, yet so beautiful and valuable.

The net of the kingdom is a dragnet. It catches anything and everything, draws it in, just as Jesus on the cross would draw all things to himself. No discriminating judgment. God does not prejudge us. He drags us into the net, the big net that catches everyone and everything. Finally, it is only God who judges us, and before God both our vices and our virtues must be burned away.

So what's the kingdom of heaven like? It is mysterious, beyond us. We don't own it nor are we in control. The kingdom changes us, works on us in hidden ways, like yeast in the bread dough, transforming to help feed the world with the bread of God's good news. Maybe God is at work among us and through us, producing in us a pearl of great price. Perhaps there is God's treasure hidden even in this field, among us. And the kingdom welcomes all sorts of birds. There are no preemptive judgments or exclusions from God's kingdom. The kingdom of God does not summarily rule out certain people.

So, with St. Paul, we say, "If God is for us, who is against us? The Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding with sighs too deep for words. If God is for us, who is against us? He did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for us all. It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? I am convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.