

What a surprise!

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 26 July, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Pentecost 8A

Genesis 29: 15-28; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52;

Contemporary reading; excerpt from *Showings* by Julian of Norwich

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

At first reading, both the scripture passages today give cause to the raising of eyebrows for today's audience.

The so-called negotiations, albeit devious, between two men – two men – over the future lives of two women who have no say, and the parable binge from Jesus, are both surprising when considering that they are depicting the expansion of God's Kin-dom. It seems a surprising way to do it and to describe it. The theme seems to be, that the grand scheme of realising the Kin-dom of Heaven has small beginnings.

We love the Paul Kelly song, "*From little things, big things grow*". A song that is about the story of the beginnings of Aboriginal Land Rights. Even that subject raises diverse and emotional responses from many perspectives. But the message of small beginnings is strong nonetheless. And from our own experiences, we understand that all things start small ... both good and bad, like both the global movement of preserving the environment to the threat of a global pandemic.

The passage of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew, is often interpreted with the understanding that big things grow from something small. But be careful with such hasty interpretations. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast are indeed comparisons of small, unpretentious, and inauspicious beginnings with large, impressive and awesome results.

Terrific if we are thinking in terms of anything from the working of the land, to profiting from stocks and shares, or even to church growth. By the way, that is now measured by internet views and likes, rather than the number of people in a building at a particular time of the week.

We could think also of the modest beginnings of Jesus' ministry and the Early Church as an interpretation of this parable binge. But to reduce the meaning of these parables to mean only an expansion from small to large, as being a good thing would be folly. As some advertisements say, "*but wait, there is more.*" There is much more, and it comes as a surprise.

The images of this text makes this interpretation questionable, for both the mustard seed and yeast were common negative images in first century Judaism. Mustard plants were nothing but despised weeds, a theme that we have recently visited, and yeast was the substance that was cleaned out of all Jewish households before the season of Passover, as it could corrupt the unleavened bread for the celebration. Don't tell them that yeast floats about in the air, and soberingly, like a virus! But it takes time to take effect, and therein lies more significance into the slow working of yeast.

So where do the parables point us? Probably towards what we would not expect, or want, and thereby challenging popular understandings of piety and self-righteousness.

But that is so typically Jesus. He told stories that would offend and even oppose the desired, than to support common opinion. The stories invited hearers into tough calls and hard choices and difficult decisions, into uncompromising relationship and decisions in life.

So what is the Kin-dom of Heaven like, with such strange parables that call for the value of seeming ordinary things? What is the Kin-dom of Heaven like? It is a perplexing question when you have parables to grapple with such as these.

Beware of the popular and well-trying and long-established opinion and message. From little to big is not necessarily good, but it is the well-entrenched teaching that is possibly wrong and deceptive, that we've heard from the past, from Sunday School days and onwards.

First and old opinions have need to be revised and questioned. Past assumptions come under heavy scrutiny, and it is impossible to put a truth into a box and leave it there as if it were to remain static and unchallenged forever. So the question of what is the Kin-dom of Heaven like is left to one's imagination and present understanding.

The priorities of our world have been turned up-side-down this year. A virus with tiny aerosols has proven to be the most influential consideration to world-wide decision making and the health and survival of humanity.

Would Jesus have said that the Kin-dom of Heaven is like a tiny and deadly virus? Worth considering! In the world of 2020, the interpretation is well understood. From little things ... and so it goes on.

Jesus asked, "*Have you understood all this?*" Let us not respond as quickly as it says in the text today. We cannot say, "Yes" so quickly, when we hardly bear consideration to the values we place in so many issues that crop up in life. So what is the Kin-dom of Heaven like?

One thing that these parables lead us to, is the invitation to use our collective imaginations and to share with each other what we think. There is no one answer that stands still. It is rather constantly living and changing.

The answers are open-ended and diverse and changeable. We can change our minds about our interpretation of the parables that Jesus offered.

That is the segway to another surprising story from the Hebrew Scriptures that we hear today.

So we turn to the continuing saga of Jacob, and this latest episode with Laban has to make us laugh, though it reeks of sexism and a complete disregard for the voiceless women in the story who have no say in their welfare or direction in life. The independence and autonomy of Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel does not even enter the equation in this story, and that is a major issue in today's world that is being constantly addressed.

That issue aside, there is irony in this story as we are reminded of Jacob's past devious ways and wonder if he has received some natural justice. It looks like the deceiver has been deceived and Jacob has met more than his match.

The story of Jacob has been told cleverly and deliberately, and to offer the hearers the full understanding, that God chooses even the most dysfunctional of families - and dysfunctional people - to do the work of God. The story of this dysfunctional family continues, but God works through the dirty laundry, the betrayal, and the trickery to tell the divine story.

We know this to be true — that God works through highly flawed people and families. Just like us! It is shown clearly through today's story and parables.

So God also calls us, despite our perceptions that we are not good enough or perfect enough or capable enough, or indeed, in our perceived dysfunction, we think we don't deserve to work for God. But God calls us in the here and now.

What is the Kin-dom of Heaven like?

It looks like it is a slow moving thing like yeast, weed like a mustard seed and bush, a field of potential, and a valuable pearl, and it looks like it is even expressed amidst the imperfect and dysfunctional.

What is the Kin-dom of Heaven like?

From what we learn in the scripture today, it is around us even here, and when we acknowledge that God calls and uses us, even in our small and imperfect ways, the Kin-dom of Heaven is in the here and now.