

Having Ears to Hear

Today's Gospel reading completes our look at the third teaching discourse of Jesus as found in Matthew's Gospel account. This is the discourse where Jesus teaches both the crowds and His disciples about the Kingdom of God through the use of parables. Two weeks ago, we heard the Parable of the Sower; last week we heard the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat; and this week we heard several short parables. Just as a short review of what a parable is, we see that a parable is a story using earthly terms and things to describe something that is more complex, something that is not readily understood, something of a more divine nature. Parables are unlike fables in that there can be more than one interpretation to them. There can also be different levels of interpretation, this is why Jesus used the phrase "Let anyone with ears listen!" indicating that there is more to the parable than what first meets the eye. We have also seen that sometimes it is beneficial to look at the details of the parable; while at other times, it is more beneficial to take a wider look at the parable. The other thing we noticed is that is important to hear the parable using the imagery that the first hearers of the parable would have associated with them. Keeping all this in mind, let us now turn our attention to today's Gospel reading.

The parable about the mustard seed could have provoked some head-scratching by the listeners. The mustard plant, which is actually a bush and not a tree, was considered a weed at that time and something that was unwanted in one's fields. It also is not the smallest of all seeds - there are seeds that are smaller than the mustard seed, some of which would have been known to the people in Jesus' day. So what could Jesus be saying about the Kingdom of God by using the mustard seed as an illustration? Well, by turning a bush into a tree is something

that only God would be able to pull off. Regardless of how much we water and fertilize the mustard seed, the best we could do is to make it into a bigger bush. However, with God changing something into something else is possible - if it fits God's plans. It would be no great feat for God to do this since God is the creator of all things. The birds coming to nest in this mustard tree would represent the nations of the world, coming to the tree to find rest and abodes.

On another level, we could hear Jesus making a connection between the mustard seed and the story of the Israelites. They were a small nation, actually not even a nation, when God entered into a covenant with Abraham, promising to make a great nation of Abraham's descendants. For the celebration of Jewish feasts, people from all the nations would come to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices to God for the holy day.

For the parable about the yeast, while the people would have thought of its representation of evil, it would have been similar to the weeds in the previous parables. However, on another level, like the mustard seed, it shows the influence something small can have on the bigger whole.

With the other parables given here, the ones about the buried treasure, the treasured pearl, the fishing, Jesus gives us examples of the extremes to which God will go in order to make that treasure God's own.

With all of these parables, we see that there is a process of sorts before it is done - the mustard seed needs to grow, the yeast needs time to begin to grow and have its effects on the flour, there is a process to buying and selling things and it takes time to sort the fish between the good ones and the bad ones. Through these parables, Jesus reminds us that God has a plan for the Kingdom and this plan will unfold when God wants it to and will not be hurried along by people.

By giving us a description of the Kingdom of God through these parables, Jesus knows that it will be natural for us to compare this Kingdom with other, worldly kingdoms. Worldly kingdoms are regal and majestic like cedar trees. On the other hand, the heavenly kingdom starts lowly, small and could easily be overlooked and seems to be insignificant. The worldly kingdoms can seem to be aloof with little contact with their subjects and have security to keep the people at a safe distance from the royals. The heavenly kingdom is intimate with the people. This is demonstrated by Jesus not being afraid of being made 'unclean' by having contact with people. The worldly kingdoms present a powerful and mighty leader who has things done for them, especially the menial tasks that are 'beneath them' while the heavenly kingdom is a serving kingdom, one where the leader tends to the people.

At the end of this discourse, which is the end of the Gospel reading, Jesus gives some encouraging words that seem a little confusing. When Jesus is talking about bringing out old and new treasure, Jesus is referring to the old ways of God relating to people through the Jewish people. Jesus is cautioning us that we are not to do away with and forget about all the previous history of God interacting with humanity, that is not to discard the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Just because Jesus is doing something new, relating to humanity in a new and different way, it does not make what came before obsolete. It takes a 'trained interior decorator' to be able to decorate a home so that the old and new are blended into something truly different. That is what the trained scribe does, they take the old ways of God interacting with humanity, that is they take the Torah, the teachings of God and blend it with the new covenant which Jesus brings to us, a covenant of grace and forgiveness. This blending takes the old treasure, such as the Law and the prophetic texts about the Messiah along with new treasure of the

New Testament witness about Jesus to show how God is making a kingdom that is God's Kingdom, a realm where everything is the way God intended it to be. A primary example of this kind of trained scribe would be the disciple Paul. His letter to the Romans is an excellent example of how the Hebrew Scriptures are used to show the fulfillment of the covenant through Jesus.

We have seen that the parables are a powerful tool. They're more than just a story, with names changed to protect the innocent or implicate the guilty; stories that cast a thin veil over aspects of reality. They help us to see things about God that we may have been mistaken about. Jesus had crafted the parables in such a way so that there are many layers to the stories. Besides the straight forward understanding of the parable as an analogy, there are layers that as we journey further in our faith we are able to see. It is not that a simple understanding of a parable is no longer valid when we understand it on a deeper level, it is just that it means more to us. We should also be wary that if someone has a deeper understanding of a parable than we do, it does not mean that we are wrong and not a 'good' Christian because of a simpler understanding. A different understanding of a parable only means that we are at a different place on our faith journey.

The Parables of Jesus are truly a living word, giving us a glimpse of God and then being able to allow us to see God in the world around us. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear how the Kingdom of God is present among us and to see all of its glorious possibilities.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/XstPyEq3kFE>

Service: <https://youtu.be/C6YYDrAwUVc>