

A reading from The Very, Very New English Bible:

And Jesus said to the people, “What is it that you want me to do?

And they said, Tell us a story.

So Jesus told them a story. “Listen! A sower went out to sow.”

The disciple said to Jesus, “You have already told us that story.”

“So I have,” said Jesus. “Well, try this one. There was a holy man who had to move. And lo, he took with him his sofa whereon he slept and the light wherewith he read.

And while the holy man was on his journey between houses, he grew very tired, for the sofa was heavy and the light was awkward. So coming to a field he rested for a while in the middle, sitting on the sofa. And there was a cow in the field, who came and sat on the sofa beside the holy man, so that there was very little room for the holy man. And the holy man was amazed, because the cow sat on the sofa as if she had been doing it all her life.

So the holy man said to the cow, You are welcome to your share of my sofa.

But the cow said, That comes well from someone who didn’t even ask if he could have his share of my field.

And the holy man, who was not used to being out-argued by a cow, said no more.

Is that it? said the people to Jesus.

Yes, that is it, said Jesus.

And the people marvelled, saying to each other, Many of his stories have a great moral lesson and make a good point, but this is not one of them. (From Miles Kington, Vicarage Allsorts, 1985)

OK, so obviously The Very, Very New English Bible isn’t the very latest biblical translation, but the work of a modern-day Anglican vicar turned comedy writer. But I thought the story was appropriate because sometimes, when I read the parables of Jesus and see the disciples response to them, I can relate.

We’re on our third and final week of Matthew’s first collection of Jesus’ parables, and Jesus ends with a flurry of very short ones. The thing is, while these stories seem simple, if you think about them very long they don’t all make sense, and as a group they don’t seem to fit together all that well.

I confess I’ve always wondered: Near the end of today’s gospel reading, Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” How many of those who said “Yes!” and nodded enthusiastically, were in fact really confused, but too afraid to admit it...

I read a book once called “Mis-Reading Scripture with Western Eyes” by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien that contended we all tend to do that. We say – and we genuinely believe – that we understand what scripture is telling us, but in fact we’re really projecting our own understanding of scripture – based on our own live experience and cultural blinders – back onto the text instead.

Take the idea of the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of heaven, or the Reign of God, however you might prefer to translate it. Jesus talked about it a lot. He proclaimed that it had already begun and was going to be entirely brought into being and obvious to everyone sometime in the future, but I'm honestly not sure any of us have ever really understood it.

So again today, Jesus speaks in parables - stories – riddles almost. And today they have come thicker and faster than ever. So, what is the kingdom of heaven like?

Jesus gives us a whole set of different answers to that question. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone plants in a field. Or, it's like yeast that a woman chooses to mix into her entire supply of flour. Or, it's like a treasure hidden in a field. Or, it's like a pearl of great value. Or, it's like a net thrown into the sea.

The images tumble sort of tumble over each other, and Jesus doesn't give the disciples or us any preparation, or explanation, or time for question-and-answer or careful analysis – and so we're left with them little but our questions.

One really good question might be: “OK Jesus, which is it?”

I mean on one level we know that all these descriptions are just metaphors – ok, simile's, really they all use the word “like” in English, after all. The kingdom of heaven is not a mustard seed. It's is LIKE A mustard seed. But on another level it seems that even Jesus was having trouble describing the kingdom of heaven.

On one level that makes sense. After all it seems pretty likely that human language is inadequate to describe the kingdom of heaven, in the same way our various concepts of God can never really describe God. We think of God as a loving father, as a shepherd, as the Creator, as the ground of our being, as creator, as redeemer, as One who is eternal and steadfast in love. All of those things are true, but they still fail to fully describe God, because God is infinite, and we're not

So what is the kingdom of heaven really like?

People of Jesus' time – of Matthew's time – had an image of what a kingdom looked like: A ruler with absolute power, one who had an ornate throne in an elaborate capital; one who passed out favors to those who were “his” people and punished those who opposed them.

We've adjusted those ideas a bit in our modern time, but if we're honest not really all that much. Power, respect, order, the ability to make things “right”, to preserve justice (at least as we understand it), these are all things that we associate with a king, or a President, or whatever other name we choose to apply to a ruler.

Of course in God's kingdom we add another criteria: God's kingdom will be Holy. When we think holiness we usually think of something that is set apart, something pure, something uncontaminated by the pressures and compromises and mixed motives, and mixed feelings of our everyday lives.

And when we think of heaven, we think of something that is quite literally a world apart from the one we live in.

The problem is, Jesus doesn't describe the kingdom of heaven that way at all. The kingdom of heaven IS quite different, but not in the way we might expect.

Take the first example: “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field”. God’s weird rules of gardening are at work again. Sowing a mustard seed in your field is akin to deliberately planting dandelions in your lawn. You just don’t do it. And while our modern environmental sensibilities might say – “but it’s great, it gives the birds a place to live”, remember the birds in Jesus first parable? They steal the seed and eat it. Birds were not a farmer’s friend.

So once again, Jesus has turned the world-as-we-know-it upside-down. In the middle of our carefully cultivated lawns, up pops the kingdom of heaven with cheerful, yellow dandelions.

Maybe this is Jesus way of reminding us that the kingdom of heaven is often hidden in plain sight – “hidden” only because we’re looking for something special and fail to see it all around us, springing up in the scruffy, the awkward and the common places of our lives and our neighborhoods - in the tiniest acts of trust, and hope, and forgiveness, and generosity. Where we least expect it the weeds of the kingdom of heaven are working their way up through the cracks in the ground.

Then he says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. Well that’s what a of our modern translations say, but what he really says is that it is like leaven. That makes a difference, because remember, in Jesus’ world no one really knew what “yeast” was, and it certainly wasn’t sold in neat little red and yellow packets. What Jesus is talking about is more like sourdough starter. It’s always on the edge of being rotten. That’s why in scripture it is sometimes a good thing, and sometimes a corrupting influence.

We often try to make the kingdom into a place we strive to get to. Maybe, though, we’ve God it backwards. Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is not somewhere else - not something we need to go out searching, hunting, trawling for, like the treasure-hunter, the merchant, and the fishermen with their net. What if, instead, it is the kingdom of heaven that does the searching and hunting and trawling for us.

Perhaps what these parables, what the whole gospel, really, is trying to tell us is that it is God who goes and sells everything he has to have us in his hands.

I used to be troubled by that little story. “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” I thought it sounded like that person was cheating. Wouldn’t it be the honest thing to tell the owner of the field about the treasure? If the person hid the treasure, and then bought the field so he could get the treasure, wasn’t that person stealing from the owner? It just didn’t seem right!

Of course I was missing the point of the story. The point is that the kingdom of God is of such great value that anything else we may own pales in comparison. That’s part of the message that is hidden in the parable of the merchant and the pear of great value: in selling everything else he has to buy this one, incredible, pearl, the merchant is effectively going out of business. All his other merchandise is gone. His life is changed forever by what he has found.

But the kingdom of heaven is also different from a pearl and a treasure. They can only be found once, but the kingdom of God is open to all! God offers this treasure to each and every one of us. The love of Christ from which no one and nothing can separate us, is a treasure everyone is invited to possess. It’s not a place – it’s a state of being – a way of life.

That is at the heart of what Paul is saying in today's reading from Romans. He's describing the way we experience the kingdom of heaven, catch glimpses of it, in our lives in the here and now. We're glimpsing the kingdom of heaven when we don't know how to pray but the Spirit does our praying for us. It's the kingdom of heaven when all things somehow work together for good for those who love God,

Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this in his paraphrase, "The Message," is an interesting one: "Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside us, helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good."

But that's not the only way that Paul's letter describes the kingdom. We're experiencing the kingdom of God when we know that there is absolutely nothing—in this world or out of it—that can separate us from the love of Christ.

It's God who has, from the very beginning, seen the treasure hidden in the field. It's God who has, quite literally, gone out and bought the farm. The powers of violence and suspicion and cynicism in our world may do everything they can to trample the love and grace that God has planted under foot, cut it down, and pull it up by their roots, but miraculously, unbelievably, triumphantly, those divine weeds will spring up anew in the garden, even while it is still dark.

Our job, is simply to let that love and grace grow – let the parables do their work, to let them stretch our imaginations, open our eyes wider, prepare us to be surprised at every turn by the kingdom of heaven; to join this crazy, carefree, prodigal sower, in the costly, joyful work of sowing and tending and nurturing God's love and grace in ourselves; and, as they grow into great and glorious shrubs and trees, to start making in our home in them - home for us, for our neighbors, and for all creation.

Because you see, when you find that treasure, the only thing you'll find you cannot do, is go and bury it again. The kingdom of heaven is meant to change your life in a visible, powerful, way. It is not meant to be hidden. It is meant to be shared, to be shouted from the housetops!

Many of us probably remember a song we sang in our childhood: "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." And the verse, "Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine!" You have the greatest treasure on earth. Let it shine! Amen