

30 July 2023

Genesis 29:15-28
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-42

Two young fish are swimming along when they encounter an older, wiser, fish. “Isn’t the water lovely today!” declares the older fish. The two young fish swim on until they are out of earshot, when one says to the other, “What’s water?”¹

When we come to Jesus’ parables of the kingdom we need to first ensure that we answer the question, “What’s the kingdom?” And before we do that we need to clarify that when Matthew uses the term “kingdom of heaven” he means exactly the same as the “kingdom of God” term used by the other Gospel writers. So what is this kingdom of heaven, this kingdom of God, that Jesus is so keen to describe?

The kingdom of heaven is best understood as the *kingship*, or sovereign and saving rule, of God. Because God is creator, when he becomes king in the way he intends it will involve setting the world to rights, rescuing his people from their enemies, restoring all of creation to its intended perfection and purpose.² This is something to be anticipated with great joy:

Sing, Daughter Zion;
shout aloud, Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away your punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.³

¹ I owe this illustration to Bishop Kelvin Wright, viewed on the “Gospel conversation” <https://youtu.be/ScgVunYhxqI> found at <https://www.bibleexplore.nz/ordinary17a.html>, Viewed 27/07/2023

² Wright, *Matthew*, p.214

³ Zephaniah 3:14-15

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
'Your God reigns!'^{4 5}

But this begs the question of how we can reconcile this joyful vision and Jesus' repeated announcement that the kingdom of heaven is near or present on the one hand, with, on the other hand, the reality of the world as we see it now. We look around us and see that the kingdom apparently hasn't come.

Before going on I also want to observe that our looking around at the world isn't as objective and discerning as it ought to be. We can be rather like the two young fish who don't know what they are swimming in: it is all they have ever known. We, brought up all our lives in a particular way, in a particular culture and way of being, don't sometimes see it for what it is. An example of this occurred to me a couple of days ago when I read of efforts being made in the US to ban certain books from public libraries because of their content around sexuality and gender.⁶ Regardless of the merits or otherwise of this effort, what struck me is that there are not similar efforts to call into question books that depict rampant individualism, consumerism, a purely materialistic worldview, the gun culture, and so on; nor do the campaigners seem to be particularly reflective on the way they are going about their campaign. I don't think the advocates for book-banning realise that they are themselves swimming in a culture that is profoundly anti-gospel.

Anyway, back to the main point.

As we view the world as it is, it is clear that the kingdom of God is not yet a reality. And it is this issue that Jesus addresses in these little parables in Matthew 13.

⁴ Isaiah 52:7

⁵ On Israel's hopes for the kingdom of God, see pp. chapter 10 of N T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1992, and especially pp.302-307

⁶ Gregory S Schneider, "Public libraries new front in culture war book battle", *The Post*, Thursday July 27, 2023, p.18

These parables say that while the kingdom of God is at present small, eventually it will become large and all who wish to will find security within it; while it is at present hidden, eventually its effects will permeate and transform the whole world; while it is at present to be found among much which is not of the kingdom, in the age to come there will be a sorting out under the holy and perfect justice of God.

These parables provide hope and assurance in the midst of the challenge of daily life, in the midst of the chaos and darkness we see around us.

Paul too was deeply aware of chaos and darkness: he had experienced persecution, hardship, danger, corporal punishment, and imprisonment. But in the face of that reality he was able to declare that “we are more than conquerors”.

Looking at what was going on around him it must have looked as though the rulers, the powers, and everything else in creation were having it all their own way, and that the purposes of God had been stopped in their tracks. But Paul is emphatic: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Paul’s reassurance should not be taken as suggesting that one’s positive actions result automatically in positive life outcomes. Nor should we hear Paul as saying that all things that happen in life are good in and of themselves. Diligent prayer may not deliver the promotion at work. And a personal tragedy is not a gift from God. On the contrary, this verse explains to the Romans that God is presently at work in the world *transforming* it for God’s good purposes.⁷

Paul goes on with his emphatic statements of assurance: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” “I am *convinced* that [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul’s assurance comes from the work of God in Jesus Christ.

Paul constantly encountered people and forces who were against him. This was his reality. We too may find ourselves frustrated in our efforts to do good and right; may face people who want to stop us from doing what is right; may find ourselves hindered by disease or disability; may be held back from achieving our potential

⁷ Bowden

through dysfunctional relationships, toxic guilt and unforgiveness. These may be our realities. Yet, Paul declares a greater reality: that God is *for* us, and has demonstrated that in giving Jesus.

Paul faced criminal charges as a result of his mission. This was his grim reality. We may face unfair allegations of not being good enough, not being capable enough, not being lovely enough; we may fall into temptation and sin. These may be our realities. But in terms of ultimate realities Paul knew that we have the perfect defence: against the ultimate charge of sin, God has already justified us – that is, through Christ's dying and rising, God has already pronounced the verdict of "not guilty."

Paul faced the danger of being condemned to death. That was his reality – and, in this life, was his final destination. We may face the dying that comes from being cut off from meaning, hope, purpose, and love. These may be our realities. But in terms of ultimate realities Paul knew that condemnation would not come, as God's own Son, Jesus, is reigning at God's right hand and is pleading our case.

In the midst of his trials, Paul could well have questioned God's love for him because so many things could have got in the way: trouble, hardship, persecution, danger, death. These things were real. We may experience all manner of things that we feel demonstrate distance from God: disease, failure to succeed, divorce, bankruptcy, persistent moral failure, unanswered prayer. These things are real experiences. But Paul asserts, absolutely emphatically, that, no matter what, God's love is powerful and steadfast.

How is it that Paul can be confident that God's purposes will be worked out?

Paul is confident because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By raising Jesus to renewed bodily life after a time of death, God showed that Jesus had in fact been his special messenger of hope and had been doing and speaking the truth about the kingdom. And, by raising Jesus, God showed that the last weapon of all tyrants – death – has been conquered.

But we therefore each have a decision to make. Do we want to be part of this or not? Do we want to be on the side of life, or of death? Like a pearl of great value, or a treasure hidden in the field, the kingdom of God is worth giving up everything else for. Because this too is what the kingdom of heaven is all about: when Jesus invites

us to enter his kingdom he means that we are to give our full allegiance to him and his cause.⁸

It is said that in the preparation of bacon and eggs for breakfast, the chicken is merely involved, but the pig is committed.

Like many simple slogans, metaphors, or, indeed, parables, we need to be clear about what this little illustration is about and what it is not. It is not to suggest a mindless, careless, throwing away of our lives, our health and wellbeing, our resources, simply for the sake of it. The commitment is not to the giving up of oneself. The commitment should be to Christ and to whatever he is asking of us, and, as the saying suggests, this commitment should be total. We cannot be partly on the side of life and partly on the side of death: we must choose who we will follow. God's kingly reign is only recognised in part at present. But at the end of the present age it will be recognised in full: it will be received with gladness by those who have chosen to align themselves to God's reign; it will be received with terror by those who have chosen for evil.

Like the two fish in my opening, we need to properly understand the water, the nature of the environment in which we find ourselves. And a proper evaluation will include recognition of the good that is there. It is not all bad; there are kingdom signs among us – where there is love, faith, goodness, trust, generosity, empathy, healing, forgiveness, caring, building one another up, hospitality and openness, and so on. We need pay attention to this little kingdom signs, celebrate them, affirm them, join in with them.

The parables of mustard seed and yeast should teach us that the smallest bit of faith, the smallest act of generosity or love, makes huge difference out of all proportion.

In this way we are part of the work of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. While the kingdom may seem far off, we do well to do our best to live as if it were already complete among us: for this helps form us in readiness for the day when the kingly reign of God is made complete, and it helps draw others into the life of the kingdom.

⁸ Wright, *Matthew*, p.214

The parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure in the field suggest another interpretation too, which, whether it was originally intended by Jesus or not, is equally valid. We are pearls of great price, we are treasure hidden in field, worth giving up everything for.⁹ And that is exactly what God in Jesus did: as Paul says, “God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.”¹⁰ God demonstrated his absolute commitment to us in Jesus giving his all for us. God never intended his Son to be an only child. We are not an accident for whom sudden and unexpected alterations had to be made. God prepared his extensive nurseries from the beginning, and he knew that wipe-down surfaces would be necessary. We, with all that we entail, are God’s choice. He knew what we would be like, and how expensive we would be, and he didn’t care.¹¹

You are a pearl of great price. You are treasure. You are of such value to God that nothing can ultimately prevail against us, because nothing can separate us from his love.

Sources:

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⁹ Bishop Kelvin Wright, viewed on the “Gospel conversation” <https://youtu.be/ScgVunYhxqI> found at <https://www.bibleexplore.nz/ordinary17a.html>, Viewed 27/07/2023

¹⁰ Romans 8:32

¹¹ Williams, *Reflections*, p.95