

Sunday 9th August – Matthew 13:31-35: The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Yeast

Much to the annoyance of my children, I love an old castle. I'm a sucker for a 10-foot-thick wall and some crenellation. My particular favourites are the great castles built by Edward I along the Welsh coast – huge imposing structures like Caernarvon, or Harlech, or Conwy. I could spend all day exploring every nook and cranny – in fact I did spend most of a couple of days a few years ago, prompting much rolling of eyes from the rest of my family.

It's probably fair to say that Edward I wasn't the sort of chap you'd want to meet in a dark alley late at night. He loved war and conquest – always a worrying sign – and he was very much of the old-school terrifying type of king. And the reason he built these big castles was to show the local population who was boss, precisely whose kingdom was in charge.

How do you measure the power or success of a kingdom? King Edward's castles are a great example of how all worldly kingdoms measure their power and success – *through visible signs of strength or wealth*. Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, Hadrian's Wall – we can journey up and down the country and find these monuments to the power of a worldly kingdom. We might enjoy them now as tourist attractions – or at least we could until a few months ago – but their original purpose was something much more intimidating.

The kingdom of God is completely different. Scattered throughout these gospels are these tantalising pictures of a completely different social order, and what's so surprising about them is that they turn our natural values upside down. This week and next we'll look at two of the most challenging images Jesus gives us for what his kingdom looks like, and we begin today with these two little parables of the mustard seed and the yeast.

They both make the same two simple points. The first is that **Jesus' kingdom seems to be small and insignificant**. A mustard seed is tiny, a batch of yeast is barely visible in the dough mixture. If worldly power is all about showiness, visible signs of how great a kingdom is, God's way of doing things is completely the opposite.

Jesus himself actively refused power every time he was offered it. When the people wanted to make him king by force shortly after feeding the 5,000 in John chapter 6, Jesus withdraws to a mountain by himself. When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with thousands of followers ready to proclaim him the military Messiah, he immediately leaves again and spends the night in Bethany. When Judas arrives with the mob to arrest him later that week, Jesus refers to the fact that he could easily summon 12 legions of angels to squish them like *that*, but he chooses to surrender without a fight.

It is ironic that the church is often best known now for its huge imposing buildings – much as we love them, I wonder if the real Jesus of the gospels would have endorsed this?

The kingdom appears small and insignificant.... **but it also has great influence and potential**. That is the flip side of the image isn't it? The mustard seed starts tiny, but grows to a great size. Yeast is only used in tiny amounts, but causes the whole batch of dough to rise.

The kingdom of God, Jesus says, punches well above its weight. Just a small number of Jesus' followers can influence a whole culture. Just a tiny Christian community can grow to a great size.

Which is exactly what happened in the early years of the church. The church grew from about 120 people at Pentecost to an estimated 20 million by AD 300. Roman society was profoundly shaped too, such that the Emperor, Julian, in 361AD complained about Christians that 'not only do they look after their own poor, they look after ours as well!' In the centuries to come, universal access to schools, hospitals, hospices and social care all found their origins in Christian communities and ministries. The yeast worked its way through the whole batch of dough.

Even today, I wonder if the mustard seed principle is at work in our church in new ways. The stats suggest that in the UK when we shut our church buildings in March we basically doubled our congregations online. Isn't that just how the upside-down kingdom of Jesus works? Take away our visible signs of power and we become far more influential than we thought possible! Our worship can now reach into every home. So many more people are nesting in our branches – and I thank God for that.

So here's to the mustard seed. Here's to the yeast. Here's to us becoming ever more apparently invisible – because maybe, just maybe, that's exactly when God will bless us the most, and work the yeast of our good news through our world once again. Amen.