Seventh Sunday after Trinity 26th July 2020

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 Revd Peter Jones

Can you imagine how insignificant the small group of followers would have felt, as they stood around Jesus as he taught them? The whole Roman Empire controlled them, the edifice of Jewish tradition surrounded them, and even other cultural influences would have seemed to overwhelm such a small group.

We can feel that insignificance at times today. I was looking for when the Sunday morning service was on TV, and it has disappeared! It has been replaced with cooking programmes and re-runs of *Homes Under the Hammer* now that the lockdown has been eased. Christians are just not mainstream enough anymore.

Jesus has been teaching his followers about who he is, and how all people are to respond to the Lord. He is surrounded by various groups, those who are eager to learn more, those who want to hear him say the things that they already agree with, and those who are trying to catch him out and silence him. But Jesus challenges all of them about how they will respond to Him. Are they going to commit themselves to Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven that He represents? Jesus also challenges us, today, with those same questions of response and commitment. With Jesus, it seems that there are no half measures!

Just before our reading today, St Matthew has recorded Jesus’ parable of the sower and the challenge of the different soils. We have the rocky soil, the contaminated soil, and the good soil that enabled an extraordinary crop to grow. Jesus is asking his listeners to think about what type of soil best describes the faith they have. Is it like the rocky soil that will not respond to the good news that they have been given, or are they going to let it get all tangled up so that they can no longer grow well, or are they going to commit themselves to Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven, and be extraordinarily blessed?

That is where we then come to in our parables today. Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52.

The smallest farming seed in Palestine at the time was the mustard seed, and it would grow up to be a towering shrub, or even a tree of 8-12 feet. This group of disciples with Jesus may be a small start, but we know how it went on to grow. Going on to encompass the world and influence every nation. We may feel insignificant as Christians at times, but if the Lord is in us, and in our fellowship, then we are truly part of something mighty that does have great influence.

Which brings us to our next parable where a little leaven, or yeast, an almost insignificant amount, is mixed with 50 pounds of flour. It goes through the whole batch, and although hidden, has a profound influence on the large quantity of flour as it makes it rise. The Christian message is so often hidden and supressed, but the power of the Kingdom of Heaven works in this world through the people of God.

So, it may be small, but it is significant, and it is precious beyond our understanding.

The man who finds treasure in a field and sells everything he had to possess the land and so have the treasure as his own, understood the importance of this knowledge that he now had. That information was life changing and worth far more than all that he had.

The businessman who had been searching for the perfect pearl was willing to sacrifice everything for the perfection he finds in that pearl. Such is the value of the Kingdom of Heaven according to Jesus.

Jesus is challenging his listeners to question what THEY put value in. If we really understand the Kingdom of Heaven, then all that we have, is of lesser value than what he wants to give us freely. We can look around at the many things on offer to us today, the many different faiths and ideologies, the short-term satisfaction of desires, even the fallacy of how much we are in control of our lives. This Corona Virus has put paid to that. We now know how fragile life is now, and the shakiness of the structures we put up to protect ourselves.

The Kingdom of Heaven is of incomparable value to us. But do we hold that truth fixed before us like a filter to look through, and thereby use it to understand the world around us? Jesus talks about it being like a giant net, like a wall of net thrown out from the shore line and pulled towards the beach where everything is caught in it, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those aligned and part of the Kingdom of God, and those who aren’t. Jesus is calling those who hear him, to choose.

“Have you understood all these things?” he asks. True disciples of Jesus will grow in understanding through listening to his teaching. Disciples are to be constantly learning by listening to their teacher, Jesus, to understand what he taught and to allow that understanding to influence and direct their actions and words.

Jesus is talking about how His new teaching and presence in the world fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. It is a wonderful image of the old and the new, united in the person of Jesus. And as we come to understand it more, we will be further blessed by it as we focus on the amazing riches of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus is The Way, and he draws us along the path to eternal life through his death and resurrection.

For us, we may be small and insignificant, but as truly committed followers of Jesus our influence on the world is powerful. Through Jesus, we know that our Christian strength comes of the Lord, we have the Holy Spirit working within us and we know that we are part of a heavenly family that will never break or die. What a blessing that we don’t have to rely on our own feeble strength.

This world is ripe for such a message of God’s grace and love and willingness to work through weak vessels like ourselves. The number of new people who have connected with the Christian faith over the internet, through seeker courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored, or who have joined online services in the last 6 months, is huge. Many have never been church goers, but are now hearing about the brilliant news of Jesus. Riches without measure.

May we all be encouraged and strengthened as we hold fast to the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen