

I get great value out of my car radio – compared to the North of Ireland, I find that the Irish radio programmes are far more engaging. The week before last, I found myself listening to a programme on the classic film director Orson Wells. In discussing one particular film, the person spoke of Orson Wells stringing together a succession of scenes ‘like pearls on a necklace’. Each one was a gem, each one sets off the others, counterbalances the others and taken together they were magnificent.

Over these last three Sundays, our Gospel readings have been drawn from chapter 13 of Matthew’s Gospel. In this chapter Matthew has grouped together a whole string of parables of the Kingdom into one block of teaching.

Parables were very much part of the teaching method of Jesus as he took themes and images that would have struck a chord with his hearers. The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to , the Kingdom of heaven is like. The Kingdom of heaven would have struck a chord in contemporary Jewish spirituality. The hope that was expressed in this was not of a distant prospect, of ‘pie in the sky when you die’. No, it is more immediate and upon this hope is built the certainty that God is Lord of this puzzling world; he will not always remain far off, but will reveal himself and make good his word.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ own public ministry begins with the proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom, declaring, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.’ In this 13th chapter we have a string of these parables.

The Kingdom of heaven is like:

like a sower sowing seed,

like good seed and bad sown together,

like a mustard seed that once planted grows into a large bush,
like a woman mixing in a small amount of yeast into a batch of bread
like treasure being found in a field
like a merchant finding a pearl of great price and selling everything to get hold
of it.
like a fisherman separating out the good fish from the bad in a catch.

These are parables of the littleness, the hiddenness of the Kingdom, of the value
of the kingdom, an element of judgement. Like the string of scenes in that
Orson Wells film, the string of pearls on a necklace, each one is a gem, each
one sets off the others, counterbalances the others and taken together they are
magnificent.

This morning I just want to look at one of those gems, the parable of the
mustard seed:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and
sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has
grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, *Matt 13:31,32*

What I draw from this is that God works, through the small and the seemingly
insignificant. He who taught his disciples that that they are to become as a
little child if they are to inherit the Kingdom, takes us as we are, in our
strengths and our weaknesses, takes our witness and acts of service in all their
imperfection and works in and through those.

I want to set it alongside that other reference to mustard seed that we find in
Matthew's Gospel:

For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." *Matt 17:20*

I've spoken before of Brother Roger of Taize speaking of mustard seed faith. We can only offer God the faith we have and he will accept that and honour that, and work through that. This is something of what Paul is talking about in the opening part of the lesson we read from his letter to the Romans:

²⁶The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. *Romans 8:26*

The Spirit helps us in our weakness - helps us as we are. The Spirit takes our simple acts of service, our imperfect and disjointed prayers and empowers them.

The poet Wordsworth, in his poem 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' wrote this:

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.

that best portion of a good man's life. His little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love. The mustard seed offered to God, sown by God, producing effects in the lives of others we may not even know; in them, through them, in the power of the Spirit, the Kingdom draws near, in the world, in the community in which we live.