

Getting Jesus clear... on his Kingdom

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[0 : 00] So the reading today is from Luke 13, verse 18 to 21. It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

And we pray that you would indeed teach us, rebuke us, correct us and train us this morning. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, one of the things about living in London is that we are surrounded by impressive things. Think impressive buildings, perhaps the Houses of Parliament or the Shard.

Think impressive experiences, perhaps going to the Albert Hall for a concert or the O2. Think impressive business districts, either the city, the Square Mile or Canary Wharf with their lavish offices.

Or think impressive sporting venues, Lourdes or the Emirates Stadium. We could go on, of course. Compared to which the Church and what Jesus is doing can seem starkly unimpressive.

[2 : 03] For the non-Christian, Jesus simply looks irrelevant. For those who are disciples of Jesus Christ, it's easy to feel the same way.

We read, perhaps, of declining church attendance. Or at school or work, we may feel we're just a small handful, those of us who trust in Jesus Christ.

As a pastor, the temptation is to think that I could be doing something more useful or more impressive looking with my life. Well, that is why we need to hear these two parables in Luke chapter 13.

Both of them about the kingdom of God. If you've been following our series, you'll know we've reached the end of this section of Luke's Gospel.

It's a section which started way back in chapter 10, verse 38. The key issue all the way through has been discipleship and what it looks like to follow Jesus.

[3 : 07] Now, when Luke talks about the kingdom of God, he could equally well be talking about the rule of Jesus. Because when Jesus came to earth, he came in bringing God's kingdom.

Do you remember how back in chapter 11, verse 20, having driven out a demon, an evil spirit, Jesus says, In other words, as we see Jesus driving out demons, healing the sick, calming a storm, he is demonstrating his rule over our world.

And yet there's also a future dimension to Jesus' kingdom as well. When Jesus comes a second time, he will bring in his kingdom in its fullest sense for everyone to see the new heavens and new earth.

In other words, as we think about God's kingdom, it's got both a present dimension and also a future dimension. In the same way, perhaps, at the beginning of December, as Christmas lights go up all over the place, as shops are all beautifully decorated, as all the adverts are about foods and presents that you might buy, you could say, December the 1st, Christmas has arrived.

And yet, of course, Christmas hasn't yet arrived. It's still future, because Christmas Day is still some way off. Well, Jesus' first parable is about the dynamic growth of God's kingdom.

[4 : 53] Have a look at verses 18 and 19. He said, therefore, Now, if this were the family service which we had earlier, I guess, rather like Andy did, I'd have brought in a mustard seed, tiny or perhaps a little jar of mustard seeds, and there it would be in the palm of my hand, the size of a pinhead, and we'd compare it with a fully grown plant.

And we would marvel that something so tiny that can just sit in the palm of my hand can grow into this most enormous bush. And yet, there's a sense in which even that wouldn't do justice to the parable.

Because a mustard seed might normally be expected to grow into a bush about one meter high. And yet, this is a massive tree that Jesus is describing.

In other words, it's a kind of jack-in-the-beanstalk parable. It is growth out of, it's beyond what we might possibly expect to happen.

It is supernatural growth, vast in size, far beyond the expected. Now, given that Luke begins his gospel by telling us that what he's writing is about how Jesus fulfills the promises of the Old Testament, then I guess we're bound to ask in the first instance, to look back to the Old Testament to see the significance of this parable.

[6:42] So, will you keep a finger in Luke chapter 13, and will you turn back to Ezekiel chapter 17? Ezekiel chapter 17. Ezekiel after Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations to Ezekiel.

And let me read Ezekiel 17, 22 and 23.

And as I read it, see if you can spot the similarities between these verses and Jesus' parable. Ezekiel 17, 22.

Thus says the Lord God, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I'll break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird.

[7:51] In the shade of its branches, birds of every sort will nest. Now, it's not a mustard seed, it's a tree. And yet, from small beginnings, it becomes a vastly impressive tree.

Now, given the context, it's a promise that God will restore the kingdom of King David, the rule of King David, the greatest of Old Testament kings.

Do read the rest of Ezekiel 17. Later on, it explains how God's faithless people have been exiled. They've been sent away from the land. The monarchy has come to an end.

And yet, as some of us were reminded earlier on in the summer, as we looked at 2 Samuel 7, God had promised King David that one of his descendants would rule forever.

And so, here in Ezekiel, God is promising that David's royal line will be restored, while the birds that come to nest and take shelter in the tree are a picture of the nations coming in to benefit from his rule.

[9:00] Indeed, this is the very thing that Luke tells us as the angel Gabriel proclaims to Mary that she's going to have a child.

Luke chapter 1, verses 32 to 33, The angel announcing the birth of Jesus, God's King, the one who will rule forever, the one to whom the nations will come and benefit from his rule.

Now, it may well be that in the first century, people didn't particularly need convincing about the size of God's future kingdom.

In the Old Testament, God said there would be people from all nations, a huge multitude who would come to be part of his kingdom. However, what they did need convincing of was that such a huge kingdom could start with such small beginnings.

It looked so very unimpressive. Now, I think we've seen quite a lot of the unimpressive nature of God's kingdom in this section of Luke.

[10:22] So, think, for example, of the opposition which Jesus faces from the religious establishments, from the fake religion of the Pharisees in chapter 11, verses 37 to 54, as Jesus, you'll remember, pronounces a series of woes on them.

Or the synagogue ruler. We thought about last week, far more concerns with religious rules, far more concerns with his power base than Jesus' work of salvation.

And not just opposition, but rejection. Turn back to chapter 11, verses 15 and 16.

Do you remember those who claim that Jesus' power is demonic? Others who won't accept the signs that Jesus has already given, but demand other signs instead?

Verse 15 of chapter 11. Some of them said he cast out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, while others to test him kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.

[11:28] And then we've seen the hypocrisy, haven't we, of those in chapter 12, verses 54 to 59. They're experts at forecasting the weather. They're experts at analyzing the financial markets or the sports results.

But they won't apply that same level of diligence to Jesus and thinking through who he is and why he's come. In fact, as we get through Luke's gospel, things don't get much better.

By the time of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, even his disciples have deserted him. And yet at the end of Luke's gospel, Luke records how Jesus instructs his disciples to proclaim the message of

repentance and the forgiveness of sins to the nations.

Things begin to change. God's kingdom begins to grow. We're told that 40 days after Jesus' ascension, there were 120 disciples who gathered together.

Having been filled with the Holy Spirit, they then proclaimed the message of Jesus to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem. We're told that after that, 3,000 people were added to the number of disciples that day.

[12:47] In the years that follow, the message of Jesus spreads across the Mediterranean to the very heart of the Roman Empire. Today, it's estimated that 2 billion people worldwide are followers of Jesus Christ living under his rule.

The New Testament has been translated into 5,000 of the 6,500 languages across the world. The dynamic growth of God's kingdom.

Now, I guess whether we are a Christian ourselves or not, we can't fault, can we, the truth of this parable. And the last hundred years has seen the most explosive growth of all.

And so often, just as in the first century, in the face of indifference and opposition. Of course, it's something that the secular narrative of our culture hates.

With its assumption that the more technologically advanced the society becomes, the wealthier and more prosperous the society becomes. So they turn it back on sort of old-fashioned notions such as God.

[14:07] Now, while that has indeed been the case in Europe over the last hundred years, in vast parts of the world, the very opposite has happened. Think of China.

Think of the USA. Think of much of South America. Think of much of sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, Europe begins to look like the exception rather than the pattern that others will follow.

The dynamic growth of God's kingdom. Second parable, the transforming power of God's kingdom. Have a look at verses 20 and 21. And again, Jesus said, To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened. Well, this is about a different kind of growth. It's about transformation. And again, if this was a family service, then I might bring in a few grains of yeast.

[15:18] I'd add it to some flour and some water. And we then have to wait a while. Well, we probably wouldn't wait a while. I'll probably have another example of one that I'd made earlier. And I produced the one that I'd made earlier.

And we would marvel at how the yeast had an impact on the whole batch of flour ready to be baked. Again, it's the inevitability of change, just like with the first parable.

If you know the character of yeast and what it does, then it's what you would expect. In the same way, says Jesus, if you know the character of God's kingdom, it's what to expect.

Out of all proportion with the small, insignificant-seeming beginnings. Now, I guess the question we're about to ask is, well, what does this kind of transformation look like?

Well, throughout this section on discipleship, Luke has given us plenty of examples. So turn back to chapter 10, verses 38 to 42.

[16:25] It is sitting down at the feet of Jesus, just like Mary, listening to him, doing the one thing necessary each day.

Or chapter 11, verse 2, it's praying, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, concerned more for God's kingdom and his honour than for my kingdom and my honour.

In chapter 12, verse 4, we see the transforming power of God's kingdom in the disciple who fears God more than they fear others. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more that they can do.

We see the power of God's kingdom as disciples acknowledge Jesus before others. Chapter 12, verse 8, In chapter 12, verses 22 and 23, it's seen as disciples understand both what life is about and also what life isn't about.

Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing.

[17:47] In verse 31, the transforming power of God's kingdom, chapter 12, verse 31, is seen as Jesus' disciples seek his kingdom rather than their own kingdom.

It's seen in verse 34 in the way in which they redirect their resources. As Jesus says, For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. It's seen as we live in active expectation that Jesus is going to return at any time.

Chapter 12, verse 40, You also must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. It's seen as disciples serve him in the meantime.

Verse 43, Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. It's seen as individuals understand the times in which we live and repent and put their trust in Jesus.

Chapter 13, verse 5, Now I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And as they are released from the grip of Satan, verse 16, And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?

[19 : 06] All of those little glimpses of what the transforming power of God's kingdom looks like in the lives of individuals. There's a lovely article in this month's edition of Evangelicals Now about a man called William Wade who came to put his trust in Jesus Christ from a very rough background.

And this is how he explains things. He said, Before I was converted, I was a glue-sniffing skinhead used to getting drunk, high, and in trouble with the police.

Well, he's now a church pastor. And he says to people from his kind of background, he says, they are painfully aware that they need transformation. Not someone to spruce up their lives and make them better, but someone who will give them a whole new life to begin with.

And the article finishes with him saying, Give them Jesus, the only one who can transform their lives completely. It's so easy, isn't it, to overlook this kind of transformation.

Christianity isn't a territorial, impressive in this world looking religion like Islam is, for example, or Hinduism seeking to establish impressive nations and to dominate the physical landscape.

[20 : 37] the transformation of individuals, but also the transformation of societies. Earlier on in the summer, I mentioned Don Cormack's excellent book, Killing Fields, Living Fields, about the often struggling progress of the gospel in Cambodia throughout the 20th century.

history. And yet, what had been such an unpromising and small harvest became an abundance by the early 1970s.

I want to read a quote, it's a fairly longish quote, but I think it's worth it, as he describes the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, in 1973, the country surrounding the capital in a state of warfare, as the Khmer Rouge gradually captured more towns and villages, taking over the country.

This is what he writes. The discerning onlooker would have perceived in Phnom Penh during these days, two kingdoms converging together, and yet worlds apart.

The kingdom of man and of this world was seen everywhere, in the horror, the fear, the armed soldiers, barbed wire, shattered bodies of innocent street vendors and other civilian passers-by, hit by flying shrapnel.

[21 : 58] Beggars, drunken, loutish soldiers, noisy bands of ragged and unwanted orphans, and the passing limousines of those who were doing very well out of it all.

And all these things the world's press and TV cameras rushed to record. But there was another people, a people normally relegated to the margins of popular esteem, a people composed of those who are no longer unloved orphans out on the streets, but sons and daughters of the living God, members of the household of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

Into their lives the kingdom of God had come with its power, holiness and authority. And they knew that even death and the grave would not separate them from him.

They need never have to cry in imminent death, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Such was the ripeness of the harvests, and such was the abundance of the in-gathering.

Under the fields were alive, white under harvest. All this overlooked by the world's media. Two kingdoms, the kingdom of man, the kingdom of God.

[23 : 17] One seen, the other easily overlooked. Can we see what the Lord Jesus is saying? My kingdom will grow in ways completely extraordinary, far beyond what you could imagine.

I wonder how easy it would have been for Luke's first readers to believe that, perhaps when the church numbered tens of thousands, no more. people. It's very different for us, of course, isn't it, with that figure of over two billion who follow Jesus Christ, and even, I guess, allowing for the inaccuracy of figures like that, we do live in a time when we can see the amazing fulfillment of these parables.

And yet, perhaps especially living in the UK in the 21st century, or perhaps in much of Europe, we are still tempted to think that Jesus' kingdom is weak and small.

At which point, I guess if you're not a Christian, then you'll either ignore the Christian message, or you'll just put off doing anything about it, because you'll think it's unimportant, and that other things

in life are more pressing.

Well, if you are a Christian, the huge temptation will be simply to give ourselves to other things, things that do look impressive, like work, for example, or academic success, or sporting achievements, or perhaps to look at the guest event coming up next Sunday and think, well, I won't bother inviting anyone, no one's going to come, and even if they do, nothing will happen.

[25 : 11] Now, that is a temptation you and I need to resist. If we belong to Jesus Christ, we are on the winning side of history.

God's kingdom is unimaginably powerful. Just witness the number of new churches in London over the last 20 years.

Witness you, yourself, if you're a Christian here this morning. Witness other believers around us this morning, some of whom we might have met before they were converted and think, well, I can't imagine in a million years that they would put their trust in Jesus Christ.

But that is precisely what they've done. Let me lead us in prayer. What is the kingdom of God like? Heavenly Father, thank you very much for these two parables the Lord Jesus tells of the growth of the kingdom. Thank you for the huge privilege we have of living 2,000 years later.

[26 : 23] And we can see the enormous geographical spread of your kingdom over these last 2,000 years, countless lives, societies, transformed by the gospel.

And yet, Heavenly Father, we know the huge temptation to regard your kingdom as unimpressive.

And we confess the temptation to invest ourselves in other things which feel more important, which look more impressive, perhaps things which make us feel better about ourselves.

And we pray, our Father, please would you help us to instead invest ourselves in your kingdom and in serving your kingdom until the Lord Jesus returns.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.