

Parable of the Mustard and the Yeast

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great joy to be here this morning. I'm very sorry that your rector is not here because many years ago I was partly responsible for his training in the theological college and also used to beat him regularly at squash.

So I'd like to have inspected him to see whether or not his chest muscles have slipped since the days he was but a youth. Others can tell me about that. It is a great joy to be here because your church is known very much in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in more recent times and we thank God for its ministry and the way in which it has been articulate in terms of making clear the teaching of scripture.

Well, recently in England there was dismay or denial as a result of information that was released to the press. It showed that there were more Muslims in mosques for Good Friday prayers in the United Kingdom than there were people in church on a Sunday.

The imams, the Islamic teachers of course boasted that this confirmed in part the teaching of the Koran, that it was the will of Allah that all should become Muslims. They continue to boast because in the University of Cambridge and also in the University of Edinburgh the holders of chairs in Islamic studies are Caucasian converts to Islam who indeed are evangelistic converts at that. Now in spite of 9-11 and the Bali bombings it's interesting the way in which Islam as a missionary movement is working and is growing in its numbers.

[1 : 48] And the Christian community according to this statistics is a shrinking group. And that sounds like a council of despair.

But not only from without, also from within the church there are those who seem to be hell-bent on allowing within the church what God's word does not approve of and promoting such causes through the media.

I well remember that when I worked for a number of years in the government having to face my work colleagues who wanted to know what my views were as a mere layman.

What had happened over the weekend that there was an ecclesiastical professional who'd hit the headlines in the media with something new. Remember the plural of new is news.

It has to be something new and trendy. And I wish then as I wish now that some in the denominations who have access through their office to the newspaper and television could see how difficult it is for rank and file Christians on Monday to Saturday who have to give a response to what has been said elsewhere.

[3 : 00] It would be good sometimes to put them in the marketplace and help them to realise the complications. The views are of course that the scriptures are ambiguous. Interpretation is a matter of taste or predisposition.

And scriptures that plainly say things are contradicted with incredible interpretive gymnastics that sometimes would be worthy of a gold medal.

I also worked in Singapore for ten years and I remember only too well how the episcopacy could give fuel for the Islamic missionaries to show that orthodox Christianity was wrong.

The myth of God incarnate was a book that was produced and could only be bought in Singapore through the Islamic Mission Society. A former bishop of Durham's pronouncements on the person of Jesus were headline news the following day in the Straits Times in Singapore.

And the Islamic Missionary Society made a series of videos using the former bishop of Durham's pronouncements on the person of Jesus. They used it to show how wrong Christians were and how it was that the former bishop of Durham's teaching about the prophet Jesus was in line with the Quran.

[4 : 25] Now it would be easy as a result of this to have a council of despair. But in spite of my introduction I want to cheer you up. Because if you listen to this morning's lesson you will see it's about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of his son.

And it tells us how we should see things as they really are. Not through the eyes of the media but we should see it through the filter of the word of God.

And the gospel passage will make us feel buoyant as we face this coming week. We will be bold in our witness where witness to Christ is called for. And we'll be glad that we are Christ's soldiers and servants.

And there are three reasons from this passage this morning for unbridled optimism on the part of God's people. The three of these.

First of all the kingdom of God brings about a personal transformation that cannot be reversed. The work that God does is permanent.

[5 : 34] The second thing is that the kingdom of God grows inevitably. Nothing can stop the kingdom the growth of God's kingdom. And the kingdom of God's influence thirdly is unstoppable.

We need to focus not so much on denomination but on kingdom and to see what Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God. Firstly God's personal transformation is irrevocable.

Here in the gospel story there was a woman bent over for 18 years. Jesus said that she was bound by Satan. And Jesus said woman you have been released.

Now the action in the original language implies that it is permanent. Something has happened to her at that moment which means she has changed irrevocably.

And you remember of course how this woman who had been had was so crippled now could suddenly see the world differently.

[6 : 40] She'd experienced this transformation. And of course you remember the leader of the synagogue got on his high horse and Jesus pulled him off as quickly as he got onto it. Because here was a lady to whom permanent good had been done.

and that transformation was irreversible. And everybody except the religious establishment thought it was marvellous what had happened.

A few years ago my nephew was at Whistler which I understand is not a bad ski resort here in Canada. He went there to do some work admitted by the Canadian government to do some seasonal work and he had come from a very sad and dysfunctional family and he lived a life of drink and drugs and debauchery.

And there at the ski resort one Sunday night he attended church and he heard these words from the gospel of John if you do not believe in me you will die in your sins.

And he was changed. Now we'd long prayed for him and he emailed one day to say that he'd like to meet up with me in New York where I was doing some teaching and preaching.

[8 : 01] And I had a feeling that somehow after all this time that God's word might have got through or might be getting through to him. And he phoned and spoke to my wife and told her that he had become a Christian and she cried as he told her.

Got off the phone I wondered what was wrong with my wife had she got bad news. Then she phoned out two children and they cried as well. You see the Winter family is a weepy mob.

And when I met up with him in New York and although his thought processes had been damaged through the drugs he was reading his Bible and he was also reading C.S. Lewis' book on mere Christianity and he indeed was a new creation.

And what a wonderful week that was together. He was irrevocably transformed and just recently in a phone call he mentioned to me how it was that he was applying for training for the ministry.

He witnessed to his divorced parents. He witnessed and shared the gospel at work. And the young man who'd been bombed out on drinks and drugs had now been transformed by Christ.

[9 : 24] And it is a permanent work that has been done in his life. So even if the cause of the kingdom is shot in the foot by those from within remember the gospel of Jesus Christ changes people.

They are irrevocably changed forever. and it's a change that goes to the least the lost and the last. That is the nature of our wonderful gospel and it works every day throughout the world.

I wish this morning that you and I could eavesdrop on the spy satellites and begin to try to count the number of people throughout the world who will be singing the praises of Christ this day.

The gospel has achieved wonderful things and men and women who have been bound by Satan through the chains of sin have found that they have undergone a change a metamorphosis. I was in the United States in March and I watched the TV ad and I wasn't watching but I heard someone say this changed my life so I swung around to see what it was about.

[10:36] It had a hair implant. And now he said he was not ashamed to go swimming. This changed my life.

I thought man he never had a life if that's what changed it. Okay. Okay. Man you should get a life because your life can be irrevocably transformed.

Now that is what is on offer. That is what Christ is offering to people a change a new beginning. The past need not determine the future and people are not irrevocably bound to the patterns of the past. So the essence of the kingdom is what Jesus talks about and that is why in verse 18 he said therefore in other words he's saying to the crowd you are excited they rejoiced in all the glorious things that Jesus had done and he is saying to them you ain't seen nothing yet.

Therefore he says this is what the kingdom of God is like and Jesus is searching for an analogy for what we call a parallel a comparison the word parable means a comparison and Jesus thinks about the grain of mustard seed a grain it is so small and yet in God's purposes that little thing should grow into a big tree not just a shrub and should become a place of a should be a home for birds to nest in.

[12:18] It starts small and it grows enormously and that is what Jesus says about the kingdom of God. The kingdom expands because God adds transformed people to it and that is God's purpose and that is why the kingdom is bigger than coke although it's spread throughout the world and we need to be careful that we don't engage in a council of despair because of what is said in denominational context.

Think kingdom. That is what Jesus is asking his disciples to do. One year at the Royal Ascot races in England where women spend vast amounts trying to have crazy hats that will get them shown on television and where lots of money is put on horses there was an evangelist and he carried around a sign he said put your money on the Lord Jesus Christ he's a sure winner.

Now that's my sort of evangelist actually. because what he is saying is and what he was affirming is that this kingdom will grow and grow and grow and we are not part of a losing firm a diminishing as it were international community but the kingdom of God is something that is expanding and therefore we must not listen to the council of despair.

Yes it begins small but the name of Jesus is known throughout the world and the apostle Paul said even in his day that the gospel is being embraced and is working throughout the world and if nothing else works the gospel always works.

It is true and always will be true regardless of how many or how few may initially seem to respond. So the transformation is irrevocable.

[14:24] The kingdom's growth is inevitable and thirdly the kingdom of God's influence is unstoppable. Last year in Cambridge we had a visit from the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs in Beijing.

We are a centre for biblical research and the delegation spent the morning with us and I had a chance to address them. I had been previously to the University of Peking in Beijing when they were opening a religion department and was able to give a lecture and I had another chance to speak to the Chinese officials.

I spoke on the theme of a book called Seek the Welfare of the City. Now why did I do this? Because I knew at times that there was a measure of reluctance on the part of provincial governors to prosecute Christians from unregistered churches.

Why were they reluctant? Well I knew the story but one of those who were there for this delegation told me in his province I don't like, he said, to prosecute the Christians because they make such good citizens.

Isn't that wonderful? That was the reason. They were not just simply concerned for themselves but they were concerned for the wider part of society.

[15:57] And the biblical that seek the welfare of the city is from Jeremiah 29 7 where Christians in exile of the people of God in Israel were to seek the welfare of the city and to pray for it.

and even in spite of decades of harsh and brutal treatment the influence of Christians has been unstoppable. And what a great testimony in the face where communism has failed and yet it is that

the gospel has worked.

A fellow of my college in Cambridge is from communist China. He said, the Red army in 1949 was so principled, now it's so corrupt. And I pointed out to him the problem with Marxism, its diagnosis of the human condition is wrong.

It's not as if you put people in an ideal setting, they would be ideal. But Jesus said, it's out of the heart of man that all the problems come. And it's interesting that the veracity of the gospel in China has been affirmed by the good works of God's people.

You can't squash the influence of the kingdom of God. And that's why in verse 20, Jesus said, to what shall I compare the kingdom of God?

[17 : 17] It's like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leaven. So what he is saying here is, that's what the kingdom of God is like.

It's there. You cannot stop it. Its influence will grow. Its influence will become profound. It will be observable and it will authenticate the Christian message.

So you can put everything on the Lord Jesus Christ because he's a sure winner. That's the reality of the gospel. We can always look on the bright side as that song goes because the kingdom cannot fail.

It rules on all earth and heaven. And Jesus' side is the right side to be on. You can look around and be distressed at the church in so many ways.

But if you think kingdom where transformation is occurring, where growth is inevitable, and where the influence of God's people is far, far greater than the media, who thinks that it is king, then you will not be engaging in a council of despair.

[18 : 35] We need to focus on the kingdom. It's going to last forever. You remember those of you who belong to my age, the age of Methuselah, remember they used to sing, fame, I'm going to last forever.

That ridiculous program that we all used to watch. Well the reality is that is nonsense, but the kingdom is going to last forever. And we will stand forever in our Father's presence.

And we will see how vast that kingdom is. And therefore we must not listen to the council of despair. If you knew a cure all for cancer, you'd not be silent in the presence of those who have the disease. We know there is a cure all for sin. And we must not be silent. God's people, like God's kingdom, will go on forever.

It is constantly expanding. Its influence is observable. And its capacity to release and to transform people from sin's bondage has not abated since that woman stood upright.

[19 : 46] It began the size of a mustard seed and has expanded throughout the whole world. My son would say for it, who's in the ministry, go for it.

Let's pray.