

## **Year A**

### **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

In the dark years of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, sometime in the early 1980s, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was interviewed on television. In that interview he said the following curious thing. “When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Greg 2007 July 28 *Africa and the Bible*  
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I have preached on the parable of the mustard seed before and I remember then emphasising the nature of the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, as it is referred to in the other gospels, as something that begins very small and grows into something big and significant and there is no doubt that that understanding is indeed intended by Jesus in the telling of this parable. That's fine but it doesn't begin to explain why this parable is found here among a group of other short parables. I don't think I grasped before the thread that might run through all of these little stories

and hold them together. And so what is going on here? What does a mustard seed, some yeast, a treasure hidden in a field, and a merchant in search of pearls have in common? What had Desmond Tutu grasped, that we might have missed?

When we fancy some mustard with our favourite steak, we take a trip down to the supermarket and we buy the fruit of the mustard seed, which has been cultivated for us and it's sharp taste brings out the flavour of the meat. We prize it for its qualities which enrich. The people of the ancient near east had a different view. You see, the sower

went out to sow and he put his hand into the bag and scattered the seed widely and indiscriminately as we saw a few weeks ago, reflecting on a different parable. After the seed has been sown, the farmer ploughs the soil and the newly sown seed takes root and grows. However in the midst of the erratically sown seed something emerges that the farmer has not reckoned with. A solitary mustard plant has appeared among the crop. The tiny mustard seed, hidden among the rest of the good seed, has sneaked through! It is not valued like the rest of the crop, but it has taken root and it

has grown into something significant. It is a mere weed as far as the farmer is concerned. It has been planted by mistake and should be isolated and uprooted. But there it is. It has come through.

The yeast, or the leaven, in the other parable, is not the same as the yeast used in the modern kitchen. In Scripture, leaven is almost always understood as representing that which is evil or unclean. In preparation for the Passover all leaven was to be removed from the home. It must not be allowed to contaminate. The leavening agent of the time was prepared by setting aside a

proportion of bread to spoil. If it wasn't spoiled enough, it was worthless and the batter would not rise. If it was allowed to spoil too long it would ruin the bread and could cause food poisoning which could be fatal. Only a very little, like a mustard seed, was needed to leaven flour. What the woman mixed with three measures of flour would have produced enough bread for a wedding feast.

What about the parable of the treasure which is hidden in the field? The man goes and sells all that he has so that he can buy the field and keep the treasure for himself.

What a rogue! He is nothing more than a thief. He doesn't reveal what he knows to the owner of the field before he buys it.

What about the parable of the merchant in search of fine pearls? Merchants in Jesus day were like used car salesmen in our day. I hope there are no used car salesmen here today!

Aren't these short parables today strange? They are not what we are expecting.

Long-time actress and comedienne Gracie Allen once received a small, live alligator as a gag. Not knowing what to do with it, Gracie placed it in the bathtub and then left for an

appointment. When she returned home, she found this note from her maid: "Dear Miss Allen: Sorry, but I have quit. I don't work in houses where there is an alligator. I'd have told you this when I took on the job, but I never thought it would come up." We might feel a bit like Gracie Allen's maid, trying to make sense of what we find here today!

We are being encouraged by Jesus to be disciples who value weeds, corrupting yeast, thieves and merchants. And then when Jesus asks, "Have you understood all of this?" We answer; "Yes" and then we think;



“Wait a minute!” “Have I really understood anything.”

All of these strange little parables are undermining and subverting the assumed conventions of our day. They are celebrating the hidden, invasive and unpredictable nature of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven as Matthew would prefer. The Jewish religious leaders were expecting the people to fit in with their understanding of God’s kingdom. For that to happen nothing must be allowed to upset the status quo. The inequalities and the injustices in society were simply God’s will and the people

had to accept that. The religious leaders had their world organised in a nice neat way and there could be no room for the unexpected like a mustard tree or hidden yeast to wreck it all. And so the world proceeds. And suddenly through the words of an African bishop in the late twentieth century these ancient parables of Jesus spring to life again.

“When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal.” And how they did

as those prophetic words of Tutu took root in the soil and there appeared a mustard tree. Not everyone was happy with the mustard tree but they had to get used to it.

The final words of Jesus recorded in the text this morning are very interesting. He said that every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. This is a reminder to of us of the need for the prophetic voice in every age. We have the age old truths of the kingdom and we have their new application into the changing world of today. Those who are

engaged in the work of communicating the ways of the kingdom must be aware of this and of the nature of the task that is unfolding. The simple, everyday material of life like seeds and yeast and pearls and nets are pictures of God's unfolding kingdom. Each new generation needs to be challenged to have eyes that see and ears that hear in order that we do not miss and so are resistant to the remarkable, invasive and subversive nature of the kingdom of God.