

Sermon - trained for the kingdom of heaven

Based on 1 Corinthians 1.17-31 and Matthew 13.44-58

The foolishness of God

- Paul gives a good introduction to the Gospel reading when he reminds the Corinthians about the wisdom of God.
- He starts by stating that if he tries to speak with eloquent wisdom - that is, the wisdom that he has received through his own good education, and spoken using his skills of rhetoric - then he might actually interfere with, and reduce the effectiveness, of God's fundamental message.
- He describes God's message as appearing foolish to those who conform to the priorities of the world - to the apparent wisdom of the world.
- He says that in his experience his fellow-'*Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified*'. (NRSV, 1 Cor 1.22-23)
- Here, when he refers to the Greeks, he doesn't only mean the people of Greece, but because he's writing to a church community in Greece, Paul is putting it specifically in the context of that Greek city of Corinth.
- Paul continues that this proclamation of Jesus - the one anointed by God - being killed as a rebel of the state through the shameful means of being crucified - was '*a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*'. (NRSV, 1 Cor 1.23)
- Indeed, in terms of worldly wisdom, what god would invest themselves and their sacred communication in such a person who was foolish enough to pit himself against the powers of this world, and then obviously lose in such a shameful way?
- Paul continues: '*but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*' (NRSV, 1 Cor 1.24-25)

The wisdom from God

- I find that these are words of encouragement, especially when I am confronted with situations - either directly in my own life, or indirectly through the news - where people act in worldly ways that are prideful, or wilful, or entitled, or unkind, or thoughtless -
- I find myself coming to dead-ends when I try to find the life-giving way through these situations when I use worldly wisdom.
- And then I am reminded of these words of Paul, or similar passages elsewhere in Scripture, and I try again to find the life-giving way through the challenging situations, but instead trying to apply God's wisdom, as taught to us through the words and actions of Jesus.
- Because as Paul writes, in effect: That is, if we want to boast, then let us not boast about what we have done, but rather let us boast about what *the Lord* has done.
- '*Christ Jesus ... became for us wisdom from God*' (NRSV, 1 Cor 1.30)

Parables of the kingdom of heaven

- We turn now to God's wisdom, as found in the Gospel reading.

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- This is the final part of chapter 13 from Matthew's account.
- As I mentioned last Sunday, this chapter has seven parables all describing the kingdom of heaven - that is, God's kingdom on earth.
- Some of the parables are long, like the parable of the sower, with seed falling on different kinds of ground, and the one we looked at last Sunday, the parable of the weeds.
- The others are very short: the parables of the mustard seed, the yeast, and the three we hear of today: the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the fishing net.

'End of the age' is relative

- I will remind you of some aspects that I explored last week, that apply to these parables as well:
- that when Jesus uses the phrase '*the end of the age*', he is not referring to some future fixed point in time, but something that is relative, and moves through time with every generation - so that '*the end of the age*' *has* happened, *is* happening, and *will* happen.
- This means that *all* aspects of each parable are relevant for us now - that we should not limit our engagement with each story to just one part of it.

The kingdom of heaven is dynamic

- Another aspect that I mentioned last week is that Jesus does not mean that the conclusion of each story is like the kingdom of heaven, but rather that the whole of each story is like the kingdom of heaven.
- This means that, if we look at the first of today's parables, the kingdom of heaven is not just the person buying the field with the hidden treasure.
- Jesus said, '*The kingdom of heaven is like ...*', and then he means the whole story:
 - it is like treasure hidden in a field,
 - AND someone discovers and hides it again,
 - AND then sells all that they own,
 - AND then buys the field.
- The kingdom of heaven is not static, but dynamic - it is the process that includes discovery, AND recognition of something of great value, AND the giving away of all one's previous values and priorities, AND happily - joyfully - committing oneself to claiming a deeply meaningful and satisfying way of living that is not obvious to other people.
- I will leave you to read through chapter 13 for yourselves in your own time, and reflect on all these parables in the same way, thinking about what they might mean in terms of the whole story for each one, and the relevance of each whole story for your faith life now.

The foolishness of Jesus' home town

- What I'm going to do now is skip briefly to the end of the reading before coming back to the middle section.
- Jesus goes to his home town, and teaches in the synagogue there.
- They are astounded at his wisdom and deeds of power.

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- They rightly acknowledge this, and they rightly ask about the source of his wisdom and ability.
- But then they let prejudice cloud their ability to engage meaningfully with him, and their own prejudice means that they lose out on what God tries to bless them with through Jesus.
- The reading ends by stating: *'he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.'* (NRSV Matthew 13.58)
- This is actually quite a profound statement.
- God wants to bless them, but their unbelief gets in the way of being able to receive God's blessing.
- Because God does not impose blessing upon people - rather, God offers it, and depends on us engaging with him, and being open to receiving his blessing.
- And likewise the notion that prejudice also prevents us from receiving God's blessing should be a wake-up call.
- If we are like the person who has found the treasure hidden in the field - perhaps that treasure is the way of life that Jesus shows us - then the kingdom of heaven is also about disposing of all the things that we thought were important, such as prejudicial attitudes, so that we can fully claim that treasure, and benefit fully from God's blessing.
- I think that if I were taking this scripture seriously, I would be praying to God: "Please Lord, show me all my prejudices, and help me get rid of them, so that I can engage fully with the blessings of your kingdom."

Trained for the kingdom of heaven

- This prayer leads us straight back to the middle section of the reading, where Jesus asks his disciples - where he asks us too, as his disciples:
'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been 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.' (NRSV Matthew 13.51-52)
- A scribe is someone who has learned, who has been trained, who has not only acquired knowledge, but also knows how to apply that knowledge, and knows how to share that knowledge.
- And Jesus refers not to the formal scribes who study and apply and share knowledge of God's law, as in the letter of the law -
- rather, Jesus refers to scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven - the kingdom of heaven that he has just been describing through a series of parables.
- So Jesus has been training his disciples - his first disciples then, and his current disciples now - us - as scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven.

We can also choose to be trained

- This is the reason why I have encouraged you to read through chapter 13 yourselves, and to reflect on the parables, and what they might mean for you in terms of your faith life right now.

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- It is through this intentional engagement with the teachings of Jesus that we too can become like those first disciples, like Paul and then so many millions of others, who became trained for the kingdom of heaven.
- And as such trained scribes, we can find the treasures - the blessings, and gifts, and insights - both new and old, that enable us to celebrate in, and share, and benefit from, all that is part of the kingdom of heaven.
- Both treasures that are old: that are in Scripture and the church's tradition, and that have been valued for hundreds and thousands of years,
- and treasures that are new: new revelations, new perspectives, new insights, new blessings, that we hadn't realised or appreciated before.
- Because Jesus not only reminded people about what they already knew from scripture, but also blessed them with new insights, and new perspectives.
- And Jesus still reminds us of this today, when we are open to being trained for the kingdom of heaven.
- Because Jesus Christ truly is *'the power of God and the wisdom of God.'* (NRSV, 1 Cor 1.24)