

March 15, 2009
A World Where God Changes Everything ...
Matthew 13:31-35

"The kingdom of heaven is like ..." Jesus said (Matthew 13:24) and He told a story of a farmer who planted wheat in his field, only to discover that an enemy maliciously sowed a poisonous weed in the same field (13:24-30). Jesus' point - the kingdom of God has come; God's people are actively involved in the world; His Spirit is actively transforming things ... but there is still much evil within each one of us individually and among us corporately. We live in this dual world of good and evil. But ultimately evil, death, and destruction has been defeated ... God has already won ... and in the end that will all be made plain.

But His disciples were not convinced. Jesus was saying that He was the Messiah. He was doing some Messiah-like things - healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving sins. But He was not raising an army. He was not driving out the Romans. He was not re-establishing the Jewish empire of David or Solomon. In fact opposition against Jesus was increasing. The crowds of people who followed Him, initially, were dispersing. It looked like Jesus' mission was heading toward failure and disaster not the glorious success people hoped it would be! But Jesus was doing something far more profound than anyone could imagine ...

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast ..."

Jesus gives another illustration of what the kingdom of God is like ... and it's not like His disciples might have expected. They expected to hear that *"The kingdom of heaven is like Operation Desert Storm"* - a blitzkrieg of overwhelming military force. Instead Jesus says, *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount (literally close to 100 cups) of flour until it worked all through the dough."* That's a lot of flour! That's a lot of work for the baker!

The flour represents the world. The yeast represents the influence that the kingdom of God - the church - has in the world. Like the parable of the wheat and the weeds - the kingdom of God is something that permeates the whole world - it's everywhere. It starts off small and it grows. Even though it seemed like Jesus' mission was amounting to a whole lot at the time, it was going to become something incredible. What this parable develops that is new is that the kingdom of God fundamentally changes everything it touches ...

Flour, without yeast, is terrible! But flour, mixed with yeast (even without sugar, as in French bread) is great! Yeast - the kingdom of God - changes things.

Bread wouldn't be bread without yeast. Yeast converts the fermentable sugar in the dough into carbon dioxide. This causes the dough to expand or rise as the carbon dioxide forms pockets or bubbles. It's as if breathe is breathed into the bread and it rises.

Yeast breathes life into the flour; the flour is transformed into bread. God breathes creation into being through His Word and His Spirit (Genesis 1, Exodus 15:8-10), He breathes life into Adam (Genesis 2:7), He gives new breath to His people in the resurrection (Ezekiel 37). Jesus breathes out His Spirit upon His disciples after His resurrection. After He ascended He sent the same Spirit upon the church as a mighty, rushing wind. And finally, when the church goes out to share this good news that the Spirit - the breath of God - is alive and active, it is by words - hot air, even - that the good news is proclaimed: *"God in his wisdom ... has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe"* (1 Corinthians 1:21). The world is transformed.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ..."

Jesus says, again, *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,"* one of the smallest of seeds (about a millimetre in diameter). But, within one growing season, a mustard seed can grow into a tree about two metres in height. So it is with the Kingdom of God - from the tiniest of beginnings, a great kingdom could grow ... be patient, give it time, wait ... the tree will come. No tree emerges fully grown. But the metaphor of a great tree was not lost on people like the disciples who knew the Jewish scriptures - it was a frequent description of great empires (see Ezekiel 33:1-14, Daniel 4).

Jesus is saying that this tiny movement that was beginning with Him and His small group of disciples were going to become a vast kingdom that was far greater and more transformative than the Assyrians, Persians, or Romans could ever be.

History has proved Jesus right, of course. How many hundreds of kingdoms and empires have risen and fallen ... and yet the influence of Jesus has grown and grown and grown. The kingdom of God is a tree - with branches extending east and west, north and south, bringing "spice" to the lives of millions of people around the world. But it began from a tiny seed.

Often we don't appreciate the radical revolution that has come - around the world - because of the influence of Jesus. There has been

- A social revolution: Seneca once wrote: *"We strangle a mad dog; we slaughter a fierce ox; we plunge the knife into sickly cattle lest they taint the herd; we drown children who are born deformed or weakly."* That would still be true in many cultures today - but not in the kingdom of God. When we really meet Jesus we appreciate how short we fall of His perfection - and He invites us to change. The influence of Jesus (compared to other cultures ancient and modern) includes: a value of all human life - regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, ability, income, education, etc. - from a Christian sense of mission came the first hospitals, schools, and reform movements.
- A moral revolution: the ancient world was a violent, amoral world - only strong survived - usually by violence, theft, bribery, and abuse. But Jesus championed integrity, honesty, and moral purity; a value of *"loving your neighbour."* Christians were easy "pickings" for the power mongers of their day - but the Roman empire died and the church remains, stronger than ever.
- An economic revolution: A letter from the first century reads: *"To my wife, with all my*

heart ... If good luck be with you - you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl throw it out." In some contemporary cultures the same values apply, but not in the church. When we really meet Jesus, we care about justice, the poor, the marginalized, the hurting. In other cultures such people can be cast aside, but not in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God doctors and lawyers don't practise for themselves alone, but help and heal those in distress. Teachers don't teach for themselves; they teach to build people's lives. Farmers don't farm just to make a living; they farm to feed the world. It's a whole bigger understanding of life, the world, and our place in it.

"It's not the church of God that has a mission, but the God of mission who has a church". Dr. John Sentamu

A mustard tree doesn't rally exist for itself. It provides a place of shelter and home for birds; it provides food for birds and people. Bread, of course, doesn't exist for itself. Bread ultimately is a staple of life. It is made to provide basic food for others. In the same way,

The kingdom of God - the church - doesn't exist for itself. It exists to provide the essentials of life to a world in need of shelter, food, safety, hope, wisdom, and spiritual fulfillment.

God's mission is about transformation - transforming individual lives, transforming communities and transforming the world.

Almost thirty years ago, a British pastor, David Watson, observed, "Christians in the West, have largely neglected what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The vast majority of Western Christians are church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again believers or Spirit-filled Charismatics, but aren't true disciples of Jesus Christ. If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship and actually to become disciples, the Church in the West would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering."

This is no idle claim. It happened in the first century when a tiny handful of timid disciples began, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the greatest spiritual revolution the world has ever known. Even the mighty Roman Empire yielded, within three centuries, to the power of the Good News of God in Christ.

The scandal of the church is that we no longer believe Jesus can be life-changing; He has just become life-enhancing. Being a Christian has become a nice thing that makes your life a bit more meaningful. It was never intended to be that. The church is called to transform lives. Jesus is not just a nice add-on to make us "good" people; He is the bread of life - the very substance of life; the one who breathes breathe into our bodies. Through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ there came into the world a new power that transforms human character and human communities; and liberates us from anxiety, fear, meaninglessness, transience, evil, ignorance, guilt and shame. Created humanity, in need of salvation, must realize that the culture and institutions they create are also in need of redemption, not simply of

modernizing.

The scandal of the church is that we've lost the passion to be real disciples or to make real disciples; we've become consumers of religion, not disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus wants to be our teacher, mentor, guide, master, lord - though all the circumstances of life. He asks us - He expects us - to give control of our lives over to Him. He is not a consultant we might want to talk with sometime - He wants to be in control. We have forgotten that we are the wheat among the weeds - our aspiration cannot be to be "successful" in terms dictated by our culture. It would be like putting new wine into old wineskins. It would be like trying to run the newest PC game on an old Commodore 64. It doesn't work. We are called to something better. Don't settle for the lie that *"He who has the most toys when He dies, wins."* You're still dead!

We are called to be the people of God, the God who is on a mission.

- A missionary church is focused on God the Trinity
Worship lies at the heart of a missionary church, and to love and know God as Father, Son and Spirit is its chief inspiration and primary purpose...
- A missionary church is incarnational
It seeks to shape itself in relation to the culture in which it is located or to which it is called...
- A missionary church is transformational
It exists for the transformation of the community that it serves, through the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit...
- A missionary church makes disciples
It is active in calling people to faith in Jesus Christ...it is concerned for the transformation of individuals, as well as for the transformation of communities.
- A missionary church is relational
It is characterized by welcome and hospitality. Its ethos and style are open to change when new members join.¹

The call is to live and be good news to everyone. It would be fantastic if people not only said of Jesus Christ, *"What sort of man is this?"* but said of us, his followers, *"What sort of people are they? Their gracious actions, and the language on their lips is of God's goodness and love. I want to get to know those people. I want what they've got. There is something extraordinarily normal and wonderful about them."* Can we be that sort of people? We live in a world where yeast changes dough into bread, where mustard seeds become trees, and where the people of God can change the world.

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¹ *Mission-shaped church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp. 81-2.