

## High St Uniting Church Frankston

### The inconspicuous Kingdom

Matthew 13:31 - 33, 44 - 52



Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” Not just physically near through his touch and healing, but the ways and will of God was as near as mustard seeds and baking bread and weeds in the crop and harvest. The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed wasn’t in grand castles or temples or far off heavenly visions. The kingdom is near, as near as our everyday life. And if it’s mysterious, it’s no more mysterious than how yeast works or seeds grow.

There are five parables that begin, “The kingdom of God is like ...”, in today’s passage from Matthew. Although they actually begin, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”, because Matthew was Jewish and respectful enough to not use the name of God. These verses are part of a whole section of Matthew on parables including the parable of the man sowing seeds we looked at two weeks ago. Another very familiar, close at hand, image of the kingdom Jesus is presenting. But five parables are a bit too much for one sermon! Particularly as the five parables present different aspects of this idea of kingdom that Jesus is presenting. Not the old kingdom of Israel and the faulty kings, but a kingdom with God as king. God sets the standards, with Jesus as the example, for how people are to live their lives and be the people of God in their society. The first two of today’s parables pick up that idea well. To live the way God wants means growing in faith enough to be as useful as a tree that the birds can build nests in, and living out your faith enough to influence society as yeast influences a loaf of bread.

The point of the parables is to look beyond the simple title. It isn’t, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed”, but “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field.” We have all felt like a mustard seed, too small to be of any use; a bit embarrassed because all the other seeds look so much bigger and better. But the point of the parable is that small, almost insignificant seed, when planted in the right place, can grow to be such a large plant that even the birds can find a home. The twelve disciples would have felt small and insignificant, but here was Jesus saying that they can grow to be a home for people in need. Read the early chapters of Acts to see that come about; not just souls saved in a great Pentecost rush of the Spirit, but a community that cared for the poor and needy. A parable for all the small communities of faith who feel like they can’t do anything. Be planted in scripture and prayer and open to change and growth and see what God can do.

And the second parable is far more controversial in its setting than we sense. For us, yeast is a helpful additive that produces that nice fluffy bread that we like. For the original hearers, yeast was almost a contaminant; pure, wholesome bread was flat. But again, the parable isn’t “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast”. Jesus isn’t saying the kingdom will corrupt the world, or this new faith will corrupt the people of God. The point is the kingdom is like yeast put to work, mixed with flour. Like yeast in flour, this new kingdom of heaven will be mixed in

with the much bigger surrounding Empire to produce social change. And, like yeast, that process is silent, invisible, and not dominant or forceful. But, most importantly, like yeast, the people of God are distributed throughout the Empire. Sounds a bit like Jesus on the mountain saying that we are to be the salt of the world; salt doesn't flavour a dish by clumping in one side of the pot and yelling, "Have flavour" to the food, it's distributed.

Like a seed being planted and mysteriously, quietly growing. Like yeast being distributed in the flour and mysteriously, quietly influencing the bread. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Do you have ears to hear this message?

That's the big picture, the scriptural lesson, but how does it land in your life?

*In my working life as an engineer, I had a number of experiences of people singling me out for advice, for a quiet word about a concern in their life, for something, usually something they couldn't explain. Not because I had a big sign on my desk saying Chaplain, or because I was handing out business cards, "Ross Pearce, Private Counsellor", and definitely not because I was standing up at lunch time delivering sermons. I was just me, living the best life I knew as a Christian. Quiet, unassuming, not a gossip, open and welcoming, and a listener. Without ever having been taught the parable, I was being yeast in the part of the world I was distributed to.*

Where are you placed in the world? Are you yeast, able to influence the behaviour and attitudes around you, or help others grow? Are you a seed, planted in a place that you can grow in faith? Or are you seeing yourself grow from the seed you used to be and looking for a way to be of use to others? Or have you never thought that way?

Are you one of those that people feel comfortable to talk to? Do you have work mates or neighbours approach you with their personal issues? Then you are yeast. Do people around you, friends, family, neighbours, respectfully modify their language or behaviour when you are present? Then you are yeast.

Do you feel small and insignificant but are enjoying the worship, fellowship, and nurture of the community? Then you are a growing seed. Do you feel the urge to help others, to do something practical for those in need? Then you are a seed that has grown.

The other parables in this passage speak of the importance and value of connection to God, the importance and value of becoming a part of the kingdom of heaven. And, as important as personal salvation is, as important as the Good News is, which is why it's called good, the kingdom of heaven is about how we live in this world as the people of God. It's not just about us, it's about the effect that we have on the world. Can the seed of faith in us grow to be a plant of love that helps others? Can our lives effect the world around us in a positive manner and bring hope? That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. To join in Jesus' mission to change the world to follow the ways and will of God.