

When the German prince George, became king of England, he had a special fondness for Handel's music. At a concert of the Messiah in 1743, the king and the crowds were deeply moved by the glory and grace of the masterpiece. When the musicians swelled the "Hallelujah Chorus" and thundered those mighty words "and he shall reign for ever and ever!" King George, whose English wasn't all that great, jumped to his feet thinking that they sang about him. The whole crowd, naturally, followed suit, although they were standing more out of ceremonial habit, and thinking about a different king. Since that day, though, people have continued to stand for the "Hallelujah Chorus", I wonder whether they realise it is to worship the glory of God whose kingdom shall know no end?

Rethinking the kingdom but what kind of kingdom is it? How, among the many nasty dictatorships and the autocratic tyrannies and the changing number of troubled democracies of this world, do we think about the kingdom of God, especially when it plays such a large part in the teaching of the Scripture? Matthew 13, for instance, is a profound collection of parables by Jesus whose primary focus is the kingdom of heaven.

Writing to a primarily Jewish-Christian community, Matthew honours the devout tradition of minimising public use of the name of God by using the term "kingdom of heaven." Elsewhere among the gospels and throughout the New Testament the equivalent idea, "kingdom of God," is dominant. Some of us have the notion that the kingdom of God is primarily a secret and personal rule of God in individual hearts. Time Magazine is not likely to declare God as a list topper in one of its annual collections of "most powerful leaders in the world." God doesn't have his own political party, though a few small groups attempt to lay claim to him as leader.

In 1951, shortly before he was forced from his throne by a military coup, King Farouk of Egypt confided bitterly to British Lord Boyd-Orr, "There will soon be only five kings left, the kings of England, diamonds hearts, spades, and clubs." That is sometimes the way we see the kingdom of God, sifted through the world like the kings in a deck of cards. The king of heaven may have a kind of power when we play a certain game called religion, but for the most part it is a rather invisible and private authority, one held closely in your hand so no one else sees, and played as a trump card when you run out of other options. Perhaps there is some reason for this view. Didn't Jesus himself tell Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world"? (John 18:36) And another time, when the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him about the kingdom of God, Jesus told them, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-2). Even the apostle Paul seemed to echo that when he wrote about the rule of God as be "in your heart" (Romans 10:8).

While national governments may wield temporal power of armies and economies, the church claims spiritual power and a moral sway over values and behaviour. This second view sees the world in two parts: a "secular" life of week-days and business and family and school, and a "sacred" life of the church and spirit which sneaks in now and again. A third view of the kingdom of God reacts strongly to the individualism and private spirituality of a privatised religion, and sees in Jesus' words a socially transforming message. A fourth possibility, when we look for a way to read these parables of the kingdom, is that Jesus is primarily focusing our attention on the future, and keeping our eyes trained toward the skies. We know that someday the Lord who spoke these parables will come back again, and then the fullness of his kingdom will become a glorious reality. Now, however, we live in the kingdom of Satan, the prince of this age, the ruler of the powers of darkness, as Paul put it. So we hide ourselves into our corners and protect our little ones as best we can, until someday we will see Jesus return and then we will live in his kingdom.

We have all been touched by each of these views of the kingdom of heaven. Yet today, as we read Jesus' parables again, it is important to hear the undercurrent of what he is saying. First of all, the idea of "kingdom" implies citizenship, or at least allegiance to a governing authority. This is Jesus' theme in his parable of the treasures (Matthew 13:44-46). Among the pieces of properties that we collect in this life, says Jesus, we may someday suddenly stumble upon a treasure that collects

us. It possesses us. It demands allegiance from us. It is the kind of thing that J.R.R. Tolkien tried to picture in his powerful trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Writing in the recovery years after World War II, Tolkien imagined what powers there are in this world that can possess peoples and nations, for good or for ill. His tale of the struggles of Middle Earth allegorically reflected the biblical idea of kingdoms in conflict. Either, as Jesus indicates, we play games with little treasures, buying and selling them on world markets, and moving among commercial districts that hold our attraction for a while, or we are sold out to a greater power. We sell all and buy it. We give up our claims in order that we might be claimed. So it is and more with the kingdom of heaven, according to Jesus. It becomes the badge of identification for us, as well as the symbol of ourselves. When we choose other pearls, or dig around for treasures in our own backyards we get from them what we are looking for, things that we can possess. But when the great prize of the hidden treasure comes our way, or we stumble onto the pearl of great price, we realize that our little hordes are insufficient. It is not enough to own a piece of fading substance; we need to be owned by something which transcends our time. We need God to lay hold on us. This is why, in many of the earliest liturgical forms for baptism, those who were newly coming into the fellowship of believers were asked if they renounced the devil and all his works. Early on, it was recognised that entering the kingdom of God was more than just adding another spiritual talisman to the mix of superstition; it was a fundamental commitment of identity that could not be shared. No dual passports in this kingdom! The truly great treasure demands that one sell everything else. It is exclusive. And when it is purchased, it actually purchases you.

In the parable of the net (Matthew 13:47-52) the kingdom of heaven is like a net that catches fish. It is not like a hook thrown carelessly into the water in case a silly fish might be stupid enough to nip at it. No, the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus, is a network of citizens who together are constantly under orders, under orders to bring in others. C. S. Lewis knew this under orders idea which underlies Christianity. His personal experience underpinned such books as the *Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. So the parable of the net reminds us of our marching orders in the kingdom of heaven. We are not called so that we may politely pat ourselves on the back and smile at one another in the tiny corners we occupy. No, we are part of a net that seeks and engages the fish of this world.

Finally, Jesus' stories in this chapter remind us that we can be on the winning side in the battles of life. When Jesus tells the parables of the mustard seed and yeast which we heard in last week's Gospel. (Matthew 13:31-35), he presents pictures of the kingdom of heaven that grows and dominates until it is the primary factor shaping the world. The tiny mustard seed morphs into a tree that provides a home for the birds, and the bit of yeast transforms the entire loaf until it is utterly and completely changed. And, it is important to note, these things happen rather automatically. The change takes place from within the seed, and from within the grain of yeast. In other words, the kingdom of heaven has the winning power within itself, and invites us along on the journey. We do not create the kingdom, but the kingdom creates us. Even though it appears to be insignificant at the start, the essence of greatness and the confidence of success lies within. Scripture is filled with testimonies to this. One in particular from the Old Testament is the scene in Jeremiah 32 where the prophet buys a field. Normally, this would seem like an ordinary transaction, just another day at the real estate office. But Jeremiah and the real estate agent are both holed up inside the walls of Jerusalem, and the battering rams of Babylon's armies are pounding the gates and walls to rubble. What is more, in the prolonged siege of Jerusalem, the invading armies have killed and burned every living thing for miles, and made waste of whatever farmland there might have been in the region. Added to that is the sure promise of God, spoken through Jeremiah himself, that this time Babylon would be successful and the city, along with the temple, would be destroyed. If there was ever a bad time to invest in real estate, this was it. The land itself was worthless, the currency inflated, the threat of destruction obvious and the future about as grim as any could be. Yet, Jeremiah buys the field. Why? Because he knew the power of the seed of the kingdom of God. He knew that God would have his way, even beyond the threat of Babylon. He knew that in spite of the waywardness of the people, God's kingdom would rise again and thrust itself to the heavens until even the Babylonian vulture would nest in its branches. When we hear Jesus tell us about the kingdom of heaven we recover our sense of values and outcomes in the quagmire of daily events. We carry the hope of heaven. We live as those who are under orders, under orders to be and do and make a difference. And we know who writes the last chapter, because the kingdom of heaven is growing tenaciously around us in spite of reports to the contrary. Amen. Fr Robert Newton