

Matthew 13:31-35 Jan 2nd 2011

I wonder if you have made any New Year's resolutions? Well, one wit said, "A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other", but the New Year is a time when we can look at things afresh and often see them in a different light – and this passage; Matthew 13:31-35 could just be one of those things.

Here we have two parables; the parable of the yeast and before it the parable of the mustard seed. Often, when this first parable by Jesus is retold it is explained to us that Jesus means that the Kingdom of heaven grows from a humble beginning into something great and that all the nations come and live in it; a great mustard tree with birds nesting in its branches.

But as I looked at these verses I came across some interesting ways to approach this story in, not a fresh light, but perhaps the way Jesus intended us to understand what he was saying.

First of all, we need to remember this parable sits within the context of other parables that Jesus is telling it to a crowd of listeners; the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds and the wheat both proceed it, but then Jesus starts talking about a mustard seed.

Now, bearing in mind what we have just flagged up, where else has Jesus talked about seeds?

Easy - in the parable of the sower and in the parable of the weeds – both of these two stories immediately proceed the parable that we are looking at and in both those parables, (because Jesus himself gives us the explanation) the seed represents the Word of God and the one who sows it is Jesus; the Son of Man.

But in our story this morning the Word of God is taken by a man, not Jesus, the Son of Man, and the field the seed is planted in is not the field owned by God as in the parable of the weeds, it is the man's own field – a man takes the Word of God and does with it as he sees fit, for his own benefit.

And what happens? Something goes horribly wrong – it is the attack of the mutant Mustard Seed Plants!

Folks it's like a Saturday Matinee Picture show movie because Jesus says this tiny little seed which should naturally grow into a plant no more than about four feet high suddenly becomes something so huge that it is the largest plant in the garden – in fact a veritable tree!

And what makes its home there? The birds – that's nice. No it's not! We've just encountered the birds in Jesus' parable of the sower a mere 28 verses ago and there they represented what? Who? In that parable the birds eat up the seed that falls on the rocky path and Jesus says in verse 19 that the birds represent, "the evil one [who] comes and snatches away what was sown in [the] heart [of the one who hears God's Word, but does not understand]".

It seems obvious, doesn't it, that Jesus wouldn't mix his metaphors – he wouldn't speak of birds representing Satan one moment and then the next intend us to understand them as something good – the birds nesting in the mutant mustard tree are the devil.

So can you see the fresh take we begin to get on this parable? Jesus is saying that if we take God's Word and if we try to control it and manipulate it to our own ends then what we will do is create a spectacular sight to behold, just like a tree sized mustard plant.

But that spectacular thing will actually be unnatural, it will not be what God intended and instead of being somewhere that God is glorified it will actually become a home for Satan.

And then, in verse 33, Jesus continues to the crowd with one final story about yeast added to dough. Again, we have often read this story and said, “Ahh yes, the kingdom spreads and grows throughout the whole world, but does that interpretation actually fit in with the rest of Scripture?”

Think about it, is yeast portrayed positively in the Bible? Not really. When the Exodus took place God’s people were to flee Egypt taking with them bread made only without yeast and since that time God’s goodness was always symbolised by eating bread without yeast.

When Jesus warns his disciples against the bad teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees he tells them to “beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” and Paul tells the Corinthians, “Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast— as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Cor 5:6-8)

So, because all through the Bible yeast represents evil, it’s unlikely to be something different here. It seems to be that Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven is like the flour, like the whole mixture which then has yeast mixed in with it by people, that evil is introduced into God’s perfect world and that yeast – the evil - easily spreads throughout the kingdom.

As one commentator (Charles Price) puts it, “Evil is contagious, righteousness is not.”

You know what it is like – imagine that you have clean hands and you touch something dirty. Does the dirty thing become clean, or the clean thing dirty? The clean becomes dirty – evil is contagious, righteousness is not. If you mix a little yeast in the dough are you going to get a bit of bread which rises? No the whole thing will – the yeast affects everything.

Well, we have had time to see these two parables in a new way, but what then is Jesus saying to us through them? Well, perhaps there is a warning for organised religion, never a bad thing after all the pomp of Christmas; the danger that we face when we try to institutionalise God. The danger we open ourselves up to if we stop trusting God to sow his word, if we try to take over and control and manipulate to our own ends or our own glory.

As a result the church can indeed grow into something splendid, perhaps full of finery and robes; incense and choirs or perhaps cutting edge with technology and informality; dry ice and worship bands, or perhaps too committed to tradition and the patterns created by the past, but all of which are man made additions and seem to bear little resemblance to that church we discovered in Acts 2 last year – the one which was simply devoted to God and in turn was richly blessed by him.

And these verses remind us too of how easily evil spreads, contaminating everything it touches even in God's world and even in God's kingdom. As we seek to serve God in this place and this New Year it is a timely reminder that evil can so easily come into one area of what we do and so quickly spread to and infect the whole of our personal or corporate ministry; gossip, lies, bitterness, ambition, resentment - all those and many more will work through the Kingdom of God in the blink of an eye turning us from our purpose of glorifying God.

These parables, of sowers, weeds, mustard seeds and yeast are pictures of the Kingdom of God which Jesus told to the crowd, they are not instantly attractive, parched ground, enemies sowing weeds amongst wheat, mutant plants and evil perverting all it touches, but the world has often seen God's kingdom in such unattractive terms.

However, in the next verse Jesus then steps out of the crowd and enters a house where he can speak in more depth to those who want to hear more about God's kingdom – he tells them about great treasures to be found, but that is for next month.

In the meantime as we begin 2011, perhaps it is good for us to remember Paul's encouragement and to make it our New Year's Resolution to "Get rid of the old yeast that [we] may be a new batch without yeast— as [we] really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."

And then we may just begin to glorify God and help his kingdom grow in this year of our Lord 2011.