



Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 27th July 2026

Readings: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Gen 29:15-28; Romans 8:26ff

Pentecost 9

A mustard seed, hidden treasure, a pearl of vast value – aspects of the kingdom, caught like facets in the light. Let's step into Jesus' classroom a while. For Jesus was a rabbi, and rabbis are teachers and they've many tools in their educational kitbag. They know how to arrest attention, fire imaginations, open eyes to new, unexpected and sometimes life-changing experiences. All the rhetorical skills are there. They know about riddles and proverbs, similes and metaphors, and they can pull the heartstrings and make you laugh out loud. The Hebrew word for all of that is *mashal*, the precursor of parables. Parables, as Jesus tells them, are windows into God's kingdom.

The American preacher Fred Buechner recalls a night when he was on the bridge of a freighter in the Atlantic Ocean and chatting to one of the ship's officers. He was on watch, and his duty that night was to scan the horizon for the lights of other ships. He told Buechner that the way to do this was not to look directly at the horizon itself, but to look indirectly at the sky just above the horizon. 'I discovered he was right' said Buechner, 'and since then I've discovered that is also the way to see other things.'

And that's how the parables work – you can't see the kingdom of God directly, but in his forty or so parables, Jesus tells us, 'The kingdom of God', or in Matthew 'The kingdom of heaven', is like....and like light caught on the faces of a diamond, we begin to appreciate, and to understand. One recent study of the parables suggests that they are a bit like a GPS device. They take us to where God is breaking in, and open our eyes.

We're working our way through Matthew's gospel this lectionary year, and Matthew has a clear agenda, and that influences the ways in which he records and uses the parables. That agenda becomes clear in the first story that Matthew tells, about a good man called Joseph who found out that his fiancée was pregnant, and not by him. Joseph, he tells us, was a 'righteous man', a *tzaddik* in Judaism, one who is truly righteous in regard to the Torah, so deeply wedded to the Law that he is simply 'a holy man', focused on God, letting the light of God shine. It is because he is obedient that he seeks to put Mary aside quietly, when under the Law he would have been entitled to bring her to public trial and execution. He seeks obedience, not vengeance. And then something happens. An angel appears to him in a dream, tells him that Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit, and further that he must marry her and name the child Jesus. What a dilemma for a *tzaddik*! Everything he understood to be right and holy, his entire way of life, is being turned upside down. Well, we know the ending. Joseph obeys the angel. Look at Joseph then, for this is what Matthew wanted his congregation to be like – righteous, steeped in the traditions of Israel, yet open to the God who turns the world upside down and is making all things new. Jesus puts it beautifully at the end of to-day's gospel, '...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.' That's what Matthew is after – the *tzaddikim* of Christ, able to balance the old and the new. Like Joseph – the purity of marriage, that's old; taking a pregnant woman as your wife, that's new. Reading the Torah, that's old; listening to angels who interrupt your dreams, that's new. And Jesus, for Matthew is the one who does the new - re-frames the kingdom of heaven, re-interprets wisdom as being aligned to the new reality that is dawning, which is the way that God really is.

So, the mustard seed – 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nest in its branches.' (Mt 13:33)

Seeds are amazing, such potential in such a tiny space. Matthew, steeped in OT imagery about birds and trees is keen to emphasise the grandeur of the tree, and before we disappear into a botanical black hole that is surely the facet of the kingdom that Jesus wants us to explore here. And it's about managing expectation. Kings and kingdoms. Power structures. We, to our cost, know all about the balance sheet of empire, but before the British empire, the greatest was the Roman, and the people of the Holy Land knew all about that in Jesus' day. The menacing tread of the army, the brutality of oppression. Pilate washing his hands. Crucifixions two a penny. That's how power works, how authority is maintained, the empire kept intact. And Judaism had its own expectations about the coming of the Messiah – a great political leader from the line of David. War horses rather than donkey colts.

What's the kingdom like? A mustard seed. No great act in the public square. No revolution and guillotine like France, no Declaration of Independence like America, no assassination of the Tsar like Russia. A mustard seed planted by 'somebody' – just some Joe or Josephine – not even a landowner, or an elected representative. Just 'somebody'. A tiny seed, little more than a speck of dust. Unnoticed, unknown, part of the very ordinariness of nine to five. That's part of the facet Jesus wants us to see.

Now for the botanical black hole. Matthew might well be into magnificent trees, but the truth is that mustard bushes are invasive, messy, unruly and hard to control. I have a sneaking feeling that Jesus had his tongue in his cheek when he told this one. Because you can't control or tame the kingdom. You've probably heard this story before, but it bears repeating. Desmond Tutu wrote movingly about his childhood and the routine humiliations of being black in apartheid South Africa. He recalls his shame and anger when his father, who was a school Principal, was addressed as 'Ja, boy' by a young white shop assistant. But one day when he was out with his mother, a white man wearing a black cassock swept by, and doffed his hat to her in greeting. 'I was relatively stunned at the time, but only later came to realise the extent to which it had blown my mind that a white man would doff his hat to my mother. It was something I could never have imagined. The impossible was possible.' He asked his mother why the man had done it and she replied, 'Because he is an Anglican priest...he is a man of God'. And Tutu wrote, 'When she told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God.'

Well, the priest was, of course, Trevor Huddleston. A mustard seed. History is a strange, complex thing, but maybe, just maybe, the radical courtesy of a doffed hat played a part in the emergence of the new South Africa. The untidy unruliness of the mustard bush. You can't tame it or control it. Worth having, this kingdom.

Another facet - 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.' (Mt 13:44)

Another day in storyland, another 'somebody' finds hidden treasure in a field. His response? Joy, and the word Matthew uses is the same one that he used to describe the joy of the wise men when they arrived at the crib, and that he will use later in the parable of the talents when the faithful servants enter into the joy of their master (Mt 2:10; 25:21,23). So, he hides the treasure and then buys the field. This is spare and sharp – just one verse, and it's pointless asking questions like, was the treasure his to hide, and where did he get the money from to buy the field? That's not what the parable is about. It's about the unexpected joy of discovery, of the kingdom erupting into someone's life and turning it upside down – darkness turned to light. In Charles Wesley's words

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

If the parable of the treasure in the field is about the unexpectedness of the kingdom, its companion in Matthew, the parable of the pearl of great value, reveals the opposite facet. This is about a merchant in the luxury trade. According to Pliny in his *Natural History*, “The first rank..., and the very highest position among all the valuables belongs to the pearl.’ A pearl was to the ancient world what a diamond is to us – and after a life dedicated to searching out the best, this merchant discovers the very best that De Beers have to offer, and he sells everything so that he can have it. When Matthew describes it as being of ‘great value’ he uses the same word that John uses about the costly perfume that Mary poured over Jesus’ feet. We are truly in luxury territory.

If the man who found buried treasure was surprised by joy, the merchant is arriving at the end of a long and strategic quest. The kingdom, says Jesus, is like this. And Matthew’s hearers might have remembered Jesus saying in the sermon on the mount, ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and his righteousness’ (Mt 6:33). That’s what the kingdom is like, as precious as the most wonderful jewel you can imagine. Worth everything else. The tiniest of seeds, unexpected treasure, a pearl of exquisite beauty.

Not ‘may it be so’, but rejoice, ‘for it is so’.

Praise God for mustard seeds, hidden treasure and pearls of great price. And when the God of surprises passes our way, may we be as open hearted and receptive as Joseph, for in that way the kingdom comes. Amen.