

## 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 2020

(1Kings 3.5-12 ; Romans 8. 26 – end) Mathew 13.1-33 and 44.-52

I recently received a message from a friend on her 49<sup>th</sup> birthday. Normally a very busy extrovert leading a very urban parish, she has had to slowdown and stay at home. Not only because of lockdown but also because of major surgery and lengthy chemotherapy. At last on her birthday she was able to go out, and wrote: *Today I photographed and sketched 6 different wildflowers that I didn't know. I'm a novice and loving it! I want to find and learn the names of 50 more wildflowers by my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday'*

For some of us, especially those not working or looking after family members, lockdown has been a time of noticing and appreciating quite small things we hadn't paid much attention to before. Sometimes they are beautiful and benign like those flowers, but not always. It is, after all, a very, very small virus that has led to lockdown and so much death and destruction the world over.

In today's Gospel when Jesus points the disciples and us to the tiny seed that grows into a gigantic tree with nests on every branch, and to the minute amount of yeast used to make the most generous of loaves, it's not the beauty of the seed and yeast he wants us to notice: it's their potential we are asked to notice and appreciate.

For the kingdom of Heaven comes like this, in small things with great potential rather than in great displays of power and might. The Kingdom that we pray for repeatedly as we say in the Lord's prayer, *'Thy Kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven'*.

Perhaps the disciples should have learnt this already as they travelled with him teaching and healing. But the Hebrew Scriptures seemed to have pointed to the Kingdom arriving through direct, dramatic, divine intervention much greater and more glorious than this. So the connection Jesus was making would have been difficult for them to take in.

Maybe it is for us too? It's not easy to reconcile power and might imagery with the God revealed in Jesus as he attends to some of the smallest and least noticed people of his day: children, widows, lepers, women.

But it is here in small things and apparently insignificant people that the beginnings of the Kingdom can be found, if we look and see the potential. It's sometimes quite visible if we take the time to look. Other times its really buried and hidden – then we have to search and dig deep, like an archaeologist or treasure hunter or even a metal-detectorist. Often slow, hard labour is needed, yet when the discovery is made, there is such enormous joy. That's something I know about and understand – because I'm married to a metal detectorist who has found some very exciting things last touched hundreds and thousands of years ago. He wouldn't sell any of them.

Describing the listening disciples as scribes, those who will teach and lead, Jesus asks if they have understood and they say 'Yes'. Yes they have understood that the kingdom of Justice and Peace promised in the Hebrew Scriptures will come, for the beginnings are already here. They have understood the need to look out for those small beginnings and with others help then grow.

I love the way Jesus describes his teaching here as training. When we are in training we are actively getting ourselves ready, getting into practice and finding out from others how best to do so.

There are all sorts of groups and organisations today that can help us do this. The one that to me feels closest to the heart of today's Gospel is one based on an alliance of all sorts of Spirit-filled groups whether churches, schools, voluntary organisations, mosques and so on. There are seeds of this Citizens movement growing now here in Oxford.

But for a few moments I'm going to move back to South London, where I used to be, to tell you the true story of Kathleen and her neighbour Christine. About three and a half years ago Kathleen, a warm-hearted member of my church who worked as a cleaner, came to see me about her neighbour Christine. Christine, a single mother lived in a privately rented flat with her 7 children. The flat was extremely damp and mouldy, unhealthy and unsafe.

Asking the landlord to put this right hadn't worked. So Kathleen helped Christine write to Lewisham Council but it was clear that whilst they wanted to help they had neither the powers nor finance to regulate private landlords.

Kathleen was about to give up in despair at this point, but 2 years earlier the church had joined Lewisham Citizens and through this had made good friends with the RC church across the road and several local schools as well as Lewisham Islamic Centre. So we took the issue to them and, with the help of our Citizens Organiser, discovered that there are very many people in Christine's situation all over London, and the best way to change things is for a Council to apply to the Housing Minister for a private landlord licensing scheme.

And so a London-wide campaign began supported by local Bishops and a Citizens press officer. At the same time Christine, Kathleen and various members of Lewisham Citizens, were given training about how to meet with the Lewisham Mayor and Council in a way that would bring change for all the 'Christines' in Lewisham. Kathleen had never imagined she could publicly hold the Mayor to account in a packed meeting at Southwark Cathedral, but she did. She had become a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven, bringing out treasure both what is new and what is old. And so the good news is that Lewisham Council agreed, and after all the necessary consultations the application is about to go to the Government, hopefully for approval. The small seed of compassion has grown into an enormous tree.

Alyson Peberdy