

## **BIBLICAL REFLECTION**

*for Trinity 7 (26 July)*

**Matthew 13:31-33 + 44-52**

For the third week running, chapter thirteen of Matthew's gospel dominates our attention, and with that, yet more example of Jesus' parabolic teaching. It is, on reflection, an odd way to communicate a message, particularly one from which you want maximum impact, but Jesus was skilled at the art, and presumably believed it to be the best way. I, myself, would question how he could possibly have held the peoples' attention without unravelling it all, but thereby hangs the mystery of faith. One thing, of course, that parables do is to give the reader 'carte-blanc' as far as interpretation is concerned – after all, who can say your opinion is wrong when there is so much obscurity!

Today, it would appear as if the editor of Matthew's work is tidying up Jesus' repertoire. Instead of lengthy stories, we have a torrent of 'one-liners': it is like this, like that, like whatever. Whether Jesus ever fired them off in quite this way, we will never know. What is possibly more important is in what links them – and that is their overall message: that the development and success of a relationship with God requires absolute and total conviction. It needs heavy and determined investment of time, energy and willpower; and its promised rewards will flourish as a result. Be very assured of that. And in case you are not, then the final 'bullet-point' reveals just what happens to those who fail to make the grade – they are candidates for those ever-famous fires of hell.

This is all clearly following a strand of thought which we have been finding over the past three weeks, that Matthew is underlining the expectations of faith; and also revealing that when humanity exercises its rightful power to choose, so it must also face the consequences of that choice. In or out, with us or against us, in support or pushing rejection – whatever we choose, it impacts upon the relationship. Potential is always present, but so is reality.

The 'bullet-points' are, though, very encouraging, and should be viewed as triggers of faith. A tiny mustard seed that becomes a welcoming tree; a portion of yeast that transforms flour; a small discovery that increases in its value; and a single focal point that overwhelms all else. Each seems to imply that by consciously enacting a process, one that could be viewed as a seemingly mundane task, and with the right attitude and determination, the individual in question can gain the greatest of reward, be it a forest, loaves of bread, a valuable piece of real estate, or an item of great worth. On paper, it sounds like hard-nosed business sense, investing for return, turning potential into reality. In faith, a similar analogy: by investing into such, who knows what benefits we gain?

What perhaps these 'bullets' also reveal is that nothing comes without a cost. Each needed a vision, a determination, and the right conditions to prevail. Each needed the individual to want to achieve, to want to succeed, to want to prosper. Each was done with absolute conviction, for without that, each task was pointless. Even the fish in the penultimate paragraph reveal this: why bother throwing the net into the water if you did not want to maximise the value of the catch; no point bothering if only minnows were available!

140 years ago, a group of people here in North Camp were all of a similar mind. They had their symbolic mustard seed, their lump of yeast, their 'crock of gold' and their eye on a pearl – and they also had a fishing-net that they felt sure could gather a fantastic catch of souls for God. They had what they needed in theory, and they now needed to put it into practice. 140 years ago, that ground-swell caused the drawings to be drawn, the measurements to be made, the bricks to be fired, and the foundation-stone to be carved. And that nineteenth-century equivalent of mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure and the finest of pearls – along with the fishing-net – led to the building and opening of this Church. They held onto their vision, and they were determined and resolute – they knew what they wanted: they were to build a House for God and His people in North Camp, a sanctuary for their prayers, a temple for their hopes – and they were undeterred. Build it they did, and were convinced that its size and grandeur would most definitely enable God to reign triumphant in this place. And in that conviction caused a foundation-stone to be laid on this day – July 26<sup>th</sup> 1880 – by Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law, HRH The Duchess of Connaught and Streathern.

A critic, some 140 years later, might say how naive they were. Did they really think people here would want to be interested in God? Did there really need to be four hundred seats in the original layout? Could they even afford it? There proved to be not enough money to complete the tower; and shoddy workmanship caused parts of it to fall down before it even opened! Any why is the roof so high? A critic could say all of that, and probably a lot more – but a person of faith and vision can see beyond such, and it is to their example that we should aspire.

Whatever caused the great triumph of 1880 to happen now allows the character of 2020 to evolve. The spirit of their vision and expectation – and more than anything, their hope – allowed mere bricks to emblazon the Love of God writ-large. "This is a wonderful sanctuary for God," they cry out, "it is a beautiful heart of faith." It is a tragedy of modern times that so few agree with that – but that should not ever put us off. We need to revisit Matthew's parabolic 'bullets' and realise that we are the characters he mentions: in your hand right now you have a tiny mustard seed, you have a portion of yeast, you have a keen eye for investment, and you have a yearning for a pearl of great beauty – you each have the ingredients needed to replicate scripture and the hearts of those who attended upon the Duchess all those years ago – and you each have the power of God desiring for this place to be forever His House. When I eventually retire, I shall miss its tranquillity – but you can ensure that it never fades.

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