

Matthew 13. 31-33, 44-52

The parables in today's reading are quite well-known and for that reason they can be difficult to listen to and to understand.

Why? Maybe because we can think we know what they mean. We can think that we've heard it all before. Some people might be thinking "How can she possibly have something new to say about this"? or "What can she tell me I don't already know"?

Maybe the answer is that I have nothing new to say to you today but I think it is fair to say that I have never before spoken to you about these parables at a time like this. A time of such change, challenge and opportunity. In fact our lives and circumstances change every day which means that the Gospel message always has something new and different to say to us if we are ready to listen.

Many people have been cooking more homemade meals over the last 4 months than they were previously. For some, looking out new recipes or looking in their kitchen cupboards and throwing out the out of date foods has become quite a pastime.

In my spice rack I always have mustard seeds because I like to cook with them but, like many spices we have to be careful with how much we use. They are tiny. Minute. Just 1 mm wide but, they are small packages containing great power to flavour a dish. In there is enormous potential waiting to be let out.

Now I've not grown a mustard tree myself but I'm told that when they grow they can be huge. The fully grown mustard-tree is larger in proportion to the size of the seed that it comes from than any other plant in the world and in eastern countries there are mustard-trees with immense spreading branches, which offer shelter for the birds. They grow so large and so wide.

Could this, for us, be a visual aid to thinking about the very small beginnings of faith? Thinking of the stable in Bethlehem and the weak baby sleeping in a manger. From this grew a following that would change the world and still be going strong more than 2000 years later. Amazing isn't it?

And on a much more personal level this can help us to consider our own faith. What was once a small interest for us has grown and grown and is now part of who we are and how we live. This then extends to us thinking about what we have to offer or what we could do. Often we can feel that it is so little, so small that it is hardly worth mentioning.

The next parable, of the yeast that disproportionately leavens a large quantity of flour, resembles the parable of the mustard-tree, and it is often claimed that it has nearly the same meaning. That something small can grow. There is one great difference however between these parables. The growth of the mustard-tree is open, obvious and there for all to see but the work of the yeast, the leaven in the bread is hidden. It works away under the surface largely unseen until the evidence of the effect of this work becomes clear as the

loaf expands. It has been suggested that the growth of the mustard-tree represents the progress of the Gospel in the world, whereas the leavening of the bread shows its influence in the heart.

The leaven is generally considered to signify the word of God, which works gradually and silently in the heart, as yeast works in dough largely unseen until the effects show in the lives of Christian people. Shows in the way they speak and live.

Each week, each month, each year, we listen to readings from the Bible and maybe you read from scripture at home or in home groups too. If we read the Bible regularly then slowly but surely the messages contained in those passages will affect the way we understand God and understand the world. Our hearts and minds will be changed and our faith will develop and grow. But it can be difficult for us to realize that our own faith and understanding is growing.

Maybe it is when we feel we would like to join a home group or read a Bible commentary that we realize our thirst for knowledge is growing. When we start to pray more for ourselves and for others. And I wonder whether then the next step is that we realize that if we are interested in knowing more about God and his message for the world then maybe others are too.

Asking ourselves "What can we do to encourage one another in our growth?" How can we best learn together? How can we use the resources we have at our fingertips to encourage one another? The telephone, books, the radio, meeting in our gardens as long as we abide by the Government guidelines.

Let's not look at what we can't do but turn our thinking to what is possible. We live in an age of opportunity and we must embrace it.

The Church of England tells us that all across the nation there are more people watching services such as this one on the internet and television than ever before. That's wonderful. The Good News of the kingdom of God is far too good to keep it to ourselves. Why not reach out in love? Tell your family and friends about the Christian TV programs you enjoy.

Have a chat with a friend or neighbour who is struggling to understand something they heard or read about God/the Christian faith/Jesus/the Holy Spirit and think about it together. Invite someone else to read a passage from the Bible with you and then have a chat about it afterwards either together or over the phone. Read that book on your shelf that you keep meaning to get round to. Listen to a Christian radio station. They have lots of good music and discussions. Maybe explain to other people how important your faith is to you.

Even if we don't have access to the internet, we can find new and different ways of making steps in our faith journey and walking the road with others too.

Let's embrace these opportunities together as a church. AMEN