



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What is your favourite image for the Kingdom of God, and what is it about it you find most helpful?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Meditation upon the painting The Tree of Life by Jacques Chery:

When God and humankind strolled in the garden,
one cool summer evening,
they looked upon the Tree of Life, the crown of all creation,
but humankind preferred forbidden fruit
and turned their back on Eden.

And so it was, the source of life, was left to slow stagnation.

As time went on, the Tree's fruit withered
as nations warred and fought,
ended up in stormy waters, adrift and at a loss.

And as people clambered over fences,
fleeing hunger and oppression,
once supple wood did harden, and formed a cruel cross

The Son of Man came to the world,
God's peace to spread abroad,
in workplaces, in city streets, in nature wild and free.
But God's love and life was just too much
for sinful humankind to bare,
and so it was that Temple and Sword nailed him to the Tree.

When they cut him down the felled the Tree,
leaving just a stump,
they thought they'd stopped the Kingdom's march,
cutting off its roots.

But just as when the flood waters made way
for God's first rainbow,
new life sprang up, and once again
the Tree bore fresh green shoots.

And so the Tree grew day by day, with the Spirit's tending,
as humanity and God were reconciled
and seeds were sown of peace.

Slowly fruit was borne again, nourishment for the nations;
love's tenacity's unstoppable – its march will never cease!

One day God will stroll through that garden
and stop beneath the Tree,
surveying a world that's flourishing,
in north and south, west and east,
with human rights respected

and environment properly treasured;
all people enjoying the Tree of Life's fruits
at one huge heavenly feast.

Prayers of Renewal

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
We bring to you those things in our own lives
and within the life of the world we share
in need of transformation and fresh hope.

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
Set us free to follow you, and grant us that peace
which passes all our understanding. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 13:31 – 33, 44 – 52

Sermon

According to the author of Matthew, Jesus teaches the crowds only in parables in order to fulfil the words of Psalm 78:2, by bringing into open things hidden from the beginning. This contrast between what is hidden and what is revealed is a favourite theme of Matthew, and the chosen vehicle for bringing previously hidden things of God into the light is that of stories packed with symbolism. I reckon exploring the parables of Jesus is both like and unlike trying to solve a Rubik's Cube. There are similarities, because grappling with one parable on its own is like completing an edge or side of the Cube; it is a step in the right direction, but making further progress might require moving things around in a way that undoes that, even if only temporarily, as we build up our understanding by wrestling with more parables. The key difference between making sense of these parables and solving the Rubik's Cube is that following a standard formula will not do the job; we have to be ready to think for ourselves. There is no YouTube cheat video for understanding the Kingdom of God!

In chapter thirteen of his Gospel, Matthew's gathered together a set of seven parables. Those following *Windows on Worship* in the past couple of weeks will have heard the two longer stories in this series, the Parables of the Sower and of the Weeds, along with explanation for the benefit of very confused disciples! This week, the five shorter pictures of the Kingdom of God are ours to ponder, but here without the inside track of Jesus's own interpretations to guide us (or, some might argue, without Matthew's interpretations to steer us down one particular road). Either way, what we have here are five illustrations, drawing upon imagery from everyday life at the time, that offer some insight into what a world truly characterised by the love of God might look like, even as the resurrection means this reality is breaking into our world right now.

What can we learn from these stories? Well, from the Parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31–32), we get something about the irrepressible character of God’s Kingdom. Mustard seeds weren’t technically the smallest of all the seeds available, but they could grow into massive trees, reaching up to twelve feet in height. They provided a home to a variety of birds, but they were also greedy nutrient-grabbing plants that many people viewed as weeds. They would take over if allowed to do so, and thus, I wonder if this was a controversial image among its first hearers... Certainly, the Parable of the Leaven Bread (13:33) would’ve been regarded as quite scandalous. Yeast was frequently associated with evil desires (Jesus himself made that connection in Matthew 16:6), and when the Jewish people recalled God delivering them from oppression by celebrating the Passover meal, that bread *had to be unleavened*. Yet, it’s the leaven that transformed flour into something good to eat. Commentators disagree as to whether we’re meant to take away from this that the work of the Kingdom goes on unseen like the processes that cause leavened bread to rise, or that its transformative work is laid bare for all to see just as we can watch the bread baking in the oven. Perhaps *both* perspectives are useful; there’s something here about the importance of God’s timing.

Jumping forward to the Parables of the Buried Treasure (13:44) and of the Pearl of Great Value (13:45 – 46), we find two images pointing to the Kingdom being worth giving up everything else that we value. In an age where banks as we know them didn’t exist, burying money and treasures was considered a perfectly sensible thing to do, even as the principle of ‘finders, keepers’ applied! Thus, having stumbled upon treasure worth keeping, the man ploughs all his resources into securing it. The finder of the fine pearls, by contrast, sought out that which they gave everything else up for. Putting these two very short stories together suggests that, whether we discover God’s Kingdom by accident or intention, joyfully and not begrudgingly seeking it out is worthwhile because it is valuable beyond measure. The final story

in this set echoes the sorting of good from evil in the final judgement that we found in the Parable of the Weeds, with its fish of every kind (13:47 – 50) taking us a step further toward the inclusion of Gentiles as well as the people of Israel within the Kingdom, as the net is cast more widely than many of this parable’s Jewish hearers might have been comfortable with...

So, as we grapple with the Rubik’s Cube, turning it this way and that, we are rewarded with a rich variety of images to ponder. God’s Kingdom is irrepressible, born in the small things of life and growing as it will, inclusive of all while also being pesky and difficult to resist, unexpected and challenging, needing time to come to fruition, worth all that we have to give, opposed to evil, and something that can be encountered in both the ordinary and extraordinary stuff of life. This is by no means an exhaustive list and there is much more one might say about this collection of short Parables, but what are we to make of this today? Well, reading these stories in the light of the Methodist Church being at something of a crossroads grants them a particular urgency... Are we willing to give up anything to seek after that which is worth everything, as we emerge into a changing world shaped for at least the foreseeable future by the experiences of lockdowns and a cost-of-living crisis? Can we cope with the weed-like nature of the Kingdom, as it shoots up where it will, or are our instincts to attempt to reign in its growth?

There are no easy answers here, and as I said at the outset, there’s no equivalent of a YouTube guide to how to solve this Rubik’s Cube, but today’s parables are nonetheless good news. Whether we know it or not, whether we are always aware of it or not, God is at work in the world. The question is, I suppose, will we roll up our sleeves and join in with God’s transforming work as we seek out God’s Kingdom in a changing and challenging time? May we have the courage, and the imagination, to take a step out in faith and follow the Holy Spirit, wherever she made lead us. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Amy-Jill Levine's 2015 book *Short Stories by Jesus* explores Jesus' parables, looking at interpretations then and now.

Prayers of Intercession

God of courage and imagination,
we bring our prayers for the world you have created to you.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people surviving in places of war and conflict,
we pray for sanctuary, peace and the courage to keep going.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people living in regions blighted by natural disasters,
we pray for timely aid, safety and the strength to rebuild.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people exercising power and authority over others,
we pray for wisdom, compassion and selfless service.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people without a safe home in which to live and rest,
we pray for good housing, freedom from abuse and hope.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people who cannot find peace due to mental ill health,
we pray for security, calm and the support needed to recover.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people seeking to share the good news of God's love,
we pray for commitment, resilience and integrity of living.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

For all people facing illness, anxiety or loneliness today,
we pray for healing, comfort and meaningful connection.
Whirlwind God, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of quiet, we offer our own personal prayers...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing