

Seizing & sharing the revolution—Matthew 13:44-52

Theme: There's an urgency about Jesus' message—not only have we got to seize it for ourselves, we've also got to pass it on to others

Jesus outlines a vision of the Kingdom of God that is very different from anything the crowds have heard from their leaders—the priests, scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' vision is of an inclusive community open to all who want to join it. He compares his Kingdom to treasure and pearls, his community to a net catching all kinds of fish. He urges us to choose wisely and quickly and once we're on-board to invite others to join us.

Questions:

1. Do we see Jesus' parables as personal and spiritual or corporate and political? Or both? Why?
2. How would we describe the Kingdom of God in a modern parable?
3. How do we create the kind of church where people feel welcomed and included?
4. How would we feel if someone said to us that they thought our church was not welcoming? What would we do about it?
5. What do we think the parable of the net is saying about our church?
6. In what ways is the Kingdom of God like treasure or a pearl of great price?
7. What has becoming a follower of Jesus cost us?
8. Do we think the Kingdom of God is hidden? If so, how? And how might we reveal it to other people?
9. How does the sense of urgency in these parables affect the way we share our faith with others?
10. Jesus calls us all into leadership—how do we feel about that?
11. How do we feel about being described as a scribe?
12. In what sense do we base our lives and sharing of our faith on the Bible as Jesus urges us to?

Your stories:

Potted summary

The four parables that conclude the section of teaching that started in 13:1 stress the importance of choice. Everyone is invited to join Jesus' revolution, but it's not something we just fall into. We might stumble across it but we have to make a conscious decision to join it, a decision that will involve us leaving behind all the things we have treasured up till now. And having seized it for ourselves, we need to share it with others.

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What the passage is about....

The Kingdom of God is like a Prime Minister who for the sake of peace sat down with people who'd been called terrorists for a generation and concluded a deal that saw enemies working together in government. Or it is like a new government that puts reconciliation rather than revenge at the heart of its policy platform.

Jesus is locked in a political battle as he speaks in parables about the nature of Kingdom of God. He is not offering a private religious option or a spiritual solace to poor and powerless people, but a world-changing vision of a whole new way of living:

1) an inclusive community (47-50)

The longest parable of the four here (44-52) lays out a rival notion of the Kingdom of God from the one championed by the political order of his day and especially by the scribes and Pharisees:

i) a broad and extensive vision: all kinds of people are attracted and drawn in—the Kingdom of God is like a drift net tied to two boats or a single boat and the shore, which trawls a wide area, catching everything in its path (47): that's what Jesus is doing and he leaves the sorting of the catch to the end (49). For now everyone is welcome, all are caught up in the net, all have the opportunity to hear, listen and respond the message.

ii) a narrow and restricted vision: The Pharisees and their allies, however, want to sort the catch now by excluding sinners, the poor, the ignorant, gentiles and the like. They are hugely critical of Jesus' message and methods—see for example 9:2-3, 9-13; 12:22-24

These two rival notions of the Kingdom of God are still operative in our time:

- some Christians want to erect barriers that prevent people getting into the church until they've sorted themselves out; the church is an exclusive community of the saved.
- others welcome people of all kinds with open arms and help them get themselves sorted out after they've come on board, prepared to put up

with a measure of chaos in the meantime.

The question for us is which vision of the Kingdom of God are we working with? It has huge implications for what our church is like.

What separates good from bad fish is how individuals choose at some stage during their time in the net. It's about how they listen to what Jesus is saying, what they see going on in and through his ministry and how they respond to it.

That's the main theme of the first two parables:

2) an exclusive offer (44-46)

These are stories about choices made in the midst of everyday life that show us what the Kingdom of God is like:

i) joyous. It's barely any sacrifice at all to give up everything to possess what is beyond price. These parables are about what we've been looking for all our lives. It's within our grasp and though it costs us all we have, we've just got to have it; it's worth it: see Philippians 3:7-8, 10; 2 Corinthians 4:17

ii) uniquely valuable: I'll sell all I have, give up things that I value highly in order to possess the Kingdom of God—and be possessed by it:

- The labourer in v44 did what the rich young man of 19:16-30 wouldn't do—sold all he had to gain what he really wanted

- The merchant in v46 sold everything he had—including all his other pearls—to gain the one of infinite worth.

The Kingdom of God is not one valuable thing among many—to possess it, we have to lay aside **all** our preferences and prejudices, **all** the things we trust in (money, heritage, culture, education).

So how serious are we about embracing the Kingdom of God? Are we really prepared to give up old ways of doing things, traditions, things we like that others struggle with? Are we prepared to give up our rights over our possessions and resources in order to embrace the kingdom?

iii) hidden: we need to search it out (like the merchant), though, like the

labourer, we may stumble over it in unexpected places: the Kingdom of God is hidden in Jesus; he reveals it: 11, 16-17, 35 see 11:25. We can't find it unless we come and find it in Jesus. Without him it remains obscured.

iv) urgent: these are parables of action—someone else will find the treasure or the pearl if I don't act decisively now. The net is closing, the fishermen are about to sort the catch. The danger is that we act as if as if we have all the time in the world—we haven't; time is short; in the midst of life, we are in death; the net closes on us when we least expect it: so what will we choose? Will we turn our backs on the treasure of infinite worth or drop everything to lay hold of it?

3) a new leadership (51-52)

The final parable is about the people of the Kingdom of God and makes ironic use of the term 'scribe', applying it to a new leadership—us! Jesus compares his followers to the scribes, priestly people who were the Pharisee's partners:

- Like them, we are rooted in the history of God's people, able to learn from it and apply it to our situation. That means we need to be reading the Bible and seeing how it applies to my life here and now.
- Unlike them, we've been let in on the secrets of what that history really means, what it's all been pointing to: namely Jesus (11, 16f, 35).

Having learned it, Jesus now wants us to live it out before a watching world—and especially to be telling others about the treasure and the pearl that we have found, which has brought us such joy and excitement and which we want others—our neighbours, friends, colleagues—to find as well: are we up for this?

The Kingdom of God is like treasure, pearls, a net closing in: have we got hold of this treasure, sold all we had to possess it, so that when the net closes we will be the good fish kept for eternal joy and fulfilment (43) rather than the bad fish which get thrown out?