

Week 25 Ordinary Time – 2025
Isaiah 55:8-9; Ps 144; Phil1:20-24; Matt 20:1-16

The Kingdom of heaven is like...

There are 10 of these 'Kingdom of heaven' parables in Matthew's Gospel. Seven appear in quick succession in chapter 13, and the remaining 3 – including today's – are distributed further on. Upon reading them, you realise that none of the parables actually indicate what the kingdom of heaven is like. Rather they point to how, as a destination, it may be arrived at. It seems that for Jesus this is a far more pressing matter than any description of heaven itself. I will highlight a few of the parables to illustrate this idea:

- 1 *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field." (13:24).* Here good seed grows up amongst the weeds, but the weeds are not pulled out until harvest time, just in case the good weeds are damaged or pulled out by accident. Time will show what is good and what is evil.
- 2 *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in a field." - (13:31).* The things of heaven can appear small and insignificant, but they will grow into mighty things.¹
- 3 *The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. -*

¹ *"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of wheat flour till it was all leavened." - (13:33).* Similar to the mustard tree, small things of God can do great good over time.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up, Then in his joy he goes and sells all he has and buys that field". - (13:44) The treasure is God's word. Recognise it and you will love it above all else in the w

(13:45). Almost identical to the above, but a pearl, something small, and hidden, reveals in its beauty the nature of heaven to the right human heart.

- 4 *"Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." - (13:52).* God tells us to use the wisdom he has given, and reminds us to 'train for heaven'
- 5 *"The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." - (25:1).* In this parable Jesus tells his disciples of the necessity to remain awake and be watchful for his coming, because he will come at a secret time and with him comes judgement.

And now:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard." (20:1). In brief, Jesus calls those who are on the fringes of society and gives them hope.

We will treat this parable with a little more attention as it is today's reading. The house is heaven. The master of the house is Jesus. The vineyard is a symbol of the Church in the world, the inbreaking of heaven. The workers are called by Jesus to work in the fields adjoining the master's house. They do not simply volunteer to do it, Jesus invites them in to be 'hired'.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind." - (13:47). God is generous. He calls to all.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king, who gave a wedding feast for his son." (22:2) – This seems to be much more directly Jesus focused than the previous ones. The feast is for God's Son but those first called will not come, those who seem at first overlooked are now called.

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Some are called to go in at the beginning of the day, some at noon, and some at the late evening. They all receive the same days reward. This is not some socialist dream about equality of earnings, or basic minimum wage, because the parable is not about money. The last line is key: *'So the last will be first, and the first last.'*²

Why are the last first, and the first last? It is slightly irritating. Because God has a soft spot for the world's losers? Yes, perhaps so, in part. But I think in the main because of gratitude. The last are grateful that they have been called into the vineyard and not left outside, forgotten and hungry. Some who have been working hard all day have come to feel entitled to their pay, and more. They want to rank themselves in comparison to others whose work they deem to be of less value.

This is why those who know they have been forgiven a lot love God more than those who don't think they have much to be forgiven. This is not only true in the parables, it is true in Jesus' real-life encounters with people. Remember the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman with the alabaster jar?³ He knows the woman is a sinner. He lets her wash His feet with her tears and ointment.⁴ She knows what He offers her and that she does not deserve it. He is the Holy One and He has called her in the evening, at the last hour, into the vineyard. There are many modern stories of this in recent conversions, some of them are your stories.

Together, all these parables talk of recognition of, and the proper disposition to respond to, Jesus. This requires a poverty of Spirit, a flame of desire, a searching If your mind and heart are truly directed to it, well then, the Kingdom is very near and – in truth - you are seeing it already.

² Matt 20:16.

³ All four Gospels: Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8

⁴ Luke 7:36 – 50