

How do we learn and understand? How do we come to a deeper understanding of what God is asking of us?

Over the past months I have read briefing papers, guidance and even more guidance about worship, leading worship, and opening buildings – I think you get the picture. Yesterday in an attempt to work out how best to manage worship this morning with the new guidance on facemasks, I phoned 2 colleagues, as well spoke to a number of you. Everyone had a different take – despite the clarity of the guidance. For the most part the variance related to a desire to ensure that people who read facial expressions or lip read, would have the same access to worship as others. But two responses worried me – 1 which thought we needed time for a theological debate about facemasks – which apparently are not very church of England; and one who said it was the churches job to challenge not just do what the government says.

Understanding and comprehension come in many different ways – it may be in the way we challenge guidance or process information; but sometimes we find ways to choose not to understand, and put additional barriers in the way of understanding.

For the last few weeks we have been hearing a series of parables from Jesus about how we understand God, and also how we understand the Kingdom of Heaven. Today we hear 5 more descriptions of what being part of God's community is like. Each description tries to appeal to a different part of the community.

Jesus is a good teacher. He never assumes that we all learn in the same way, or understand the same stories. Though often when we listen to Christians speak about faith on the radio or television it presumes that everyone knows what God is like. The reality is, that each of us experience God in different ways and would describe God in different ways.

I was reading a commentary that put it this way - *How would you describe the wind or love? One could say the wind is like a feather's touch or love is a journey. These literary devices help give meaning to concepts that would otherwise be difficult to understand.*

However, the tools are only effective if the person who hears them understands the references used. If I have never felt the touch of a feather I cannot know how the wind felt. Likewise, if I have never been on a journey, the comparison doesn't help me better understand love. While the descriptions get us closer to the meaning, it is not the same as experiencing it. Specifically, it is the difference between knowing about something and actually knowing something. In this text, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to several concepts in order to enhance the crowd's understanding of his teaching¹.

In one of my favourite comedy shows on television, one of the characters is frightened to learn to swim. He refuses to get into the pool, or to even get into a bath. He is however worried that in a flood he might drown. To allay his fears, he takes an online course, learning from a computer the principles of how to swim. He then practices lying on the floor in his living room. It is very funny episode, but in

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3351

the end he really is only learning about swimming, he hasn't actually learnt how to do it.

The challenge of living out faith so often is that we talk about it, we study it, but sometimes we don't actually do it! Or sometimes we have faith but we expect that the outcomes will bring change quickly or in a way that we can control. The truth however is that the kingdom of God does not operate upon the desire of our whims or in a way that we might control. God happens in God's time, and in ways that God understands!

The generations of old understood time so differently to us. We expect immediate changes, quick resolutions, lasting peace. The peoples of old understood that time is not about the moment, but in some ways more about the process – and in this some understanding, some wisdom, some transformation might come!

It is a lesson we may have to learn ourselves in our current situation.

Understandably many of us are in a hurry for things to return to a pre Covid19 way, but it is more likely that we will need to live with many changes for some time, and even for a season. Maybe exploring God's time and God's Kingdom will help us be patient with this.

So how does one depict the kingdom of heaven? The possible pictures of the kingdom of heaven are certainly not exhausted by Matthew, not even by Jesus. These images are trying to help us to see that God's Kingdom is already in our midst, if we are willing to see and hear.

But there is something more going on here too - God's coming kingdom is threatening before it is comforting, because it invites no half measures. David Lose reminds us that these images of God's kingdom bring comfort most to those who are not content with what life has presented them without God.

The Gospel of the kingdom that Jesus proclaims and lives is truly good news only to those who are not finally satisfied with what this life has to offer. For those who are content, selling everything to possess a single pearl, no matter how valuable, seems a little crazy. How can anything be so precious as to give up everything else to possess it? But to those who are dissatisfied – for those who are oppressed, or for those who are limited by stereotypes, for those who have no security, – then Jesus' Gospel, while still disruptive and even upsetting, nevertheless feels true, real, and something worth buying at any cost².

The Gospel, as Paul says, appears foolish in the eyes of the world and so has little value to the self-contented, the self-made person of the age, and the powerful. But to those who are perishing – whether by illness or disappointment or poverty or dissatisfaction or even uncertainty – Jesus' promises are still good news.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-8-a-parabolic-promises/>

In this sense these parables are about seeing, not only God, but also our true selves. Do we have the courage to see our weaknesses so that we can see the true context of the God's promise?

The readings we have heard today should disturb us, they are intended to challenge how we see God and ourselves.

If we are content with our lot in life, they are a challenge us to think about where God might be pushing us next, what seeds are waiting to bud and grow in and around us.

If we are angry with God, or ourselves or a that the world – they are a challenge to consider what healing we need – how we might need to be honest, and what we might need to let go of to find something more precious.

And at a time when we are all unsettled and uncertain– they are a challenge to what we might need to sort out, what needs to be kept and what needs to be thrown away.

And when we are unsettled by the parables, and wondering about how we understand the Kingdom of God – Paul reminds us, as he reminded the Romans – the spirit of God will help us in our weakness, as much as it will help us in our strength.

In the end, we can be assured that the reason Jesus spends so much time explaining the kingdom of heaven is because we need to be reminded that it's there even when it seems so excruciatingly absent. The promise of the parables about the kingdom of heaven is that even when the kingdom is not seen, it is near! So often, the very thing that will transform our lives, is the very thing we fear the most. But today – no matter what we might fear we are reminded: *That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*³. We just recognise it! Amen

³ Romans 8: 38b-39