

**Circuit Podcast 26th July 2020 The Kingdom of God
Matthew 13: 31 – 33, 44 - 52**

One of my favourite books is Charlotte Brontë's classic novel, Jane Eyre. Jane comes from unpromising beginnings. She is orphaned when she is very small, she is sent to live with relatives who are unkind to her, ultimately then to boarding school where the environment is cruel, cold and where she loses her dear friend to tuberculosis. Yet Jane, despite being physically tiny has a fierce and resilient spirit, ultimately her education saves her and she begins work as a governess in the wealthy home of Mr Rochester. It is here that she falls in love and a seed of hope grows that life might offer some happiness after all. Sadly, tragedy strikes again and ultimately Jane believes she must leave and move to live a long way away. At that point in the story she gives an impassioned speech including these words,

'Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, that I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart!'

For me, this quotation stands at the heart of the story. Despite her lack of chances in life Jane is not to be overlooked, or disregarded, her resilience carries her and through sheer force of personality she transforms several lives and communities later in the book. I won't say any more because I don't want to spoil the story for you if you haven't read it.

Jane came to mind when I read these short parables that we've heard this morning. I think of her because she is little, often overlooked and yet, much transformation happens both through her and because of her.

Jesus is describing to his listeners what the kingdom of God is like. He gives them several word pictures they can relate to and although they still speak to us now I do wonder about the images Jesus might have used today.

The kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge tree that offers life and shelter to the birds who come to nest in it. The kingdom of God is like the portion of yeast that enables the bread to rise, a creative energy which brings food and sustenance.

This is the message - tiny things are not to be ignored. That which may at first sight seem ordinary or plain or little – is not to be overlooked. The kingdom of God is in these things which may grow to be magnificent.

Jesus goes on - the kingdom of God is like treasure hidden yet when discovered it has astonishing beauty. It is like precious pearl worth more than everything that we are and everything we own.

It is like a net bulging with fish of every kind and it is for God to judge what is bad and what is good within us.

Each of these pictures grants us a glimpse of the kingdom that is both within us and around us in both the small and ordinary, and in the beautiful and extraordinary.

I wonder if we are on the lookout for signs of the kingdom? I wonder how these parables speak now?

A couple of thoughts.

Amazing things can come from small beginnings. Where are the seeds of hope right now? Where is our creative energy? Where are the little or more easily overlooked things or people that might be transforming?

Perhaps we can find hope in the resilience of those who struggle but keep going.

Perhaps we should listen more carefully to the voices of young people.

Perhaps we are inspired by community groups on social media that begin with a few but grow to hundreds almost overnight and then explode into shopping, befriending and enduring caring for others.

We find hope in the kindness of strangers and in conversations with friends. Hope is in the undeniable realisation that we are in this together, that we must work as one body in order to grow together or we are likely to fall apart for this is what it means to be the body of Christ.

We will never know what a difference a prayer, a smile, a conversation, a phone call might make to another person, what we regard as something small might make a tremendous difference to someone else.

Or course there is a hard edge to this too – when we are critical or sniping, when we put down those who are close to us, when we disregard those we think less important – these things can spiral and cause more hurt and harm than we had ever intended. They can inhibit the growth of the kingdom, they can destroy potential, these things are weeds that choke and fire that destroys. We must take care with one another.

Secondly, the kingdom of God within us, around us and beyond us is something worth searching for, it is of unutterable beauty, it is in the sunset we viewed a few nights ago from the top of Wye downs, it is in the turn of the tide, the gentleness of a stream, the expansiveness of a swallow's flight. In these things we catch a glimpse of God's glory that is to be treasured and remembered. Jesus points us to the kingdom which causes us to lift up our eyes and look to the hills, to the beauty of nature and that which makes our souls sing. Not too long ago I attended some school governor training run by Barbara Easton who is to be our next Methodist Vice President. Barbara has worked for Methodist schools for many years. We were discussing potential vision statements for schools which were to be short and memorable. Barbara mentioned a school in another part of the country in a particularly socially disadvantaged area. There they have adopted the vision statement 'we lift our eyes to the hills' to encourage the children, staff and their families to look beyond their current reality towards new possibilities, expanded horizons and that which is beautiful, to lift their eyes to the transforming nature of God.

What can we do to lift our eyes beyond what we are currently experiencing? What might we do to be open to the creative energy of God that challenges us to new things? Where can we see the beauty of God and how does it change the way in which we think, feel and act? Having been granted so many glimpses of the kingdom what will we do with the one precious life that we have each been given?

Jesus tells stories and draws word pictures to encourage his listeners to think about new possibilities and changed lives.

They and we are reminded that the kingdom of God is creative, beautiful, unexpected and transforming. We too are challenged to lift our eyes to the hills and to wonder about what may be beyond.

Let us pray:

Loving God, your kingdom is among us,
beyond us,
and within us all.

It is in surprising places, hidden in the everyday,
sometimes it is small and easily overlooked.
Sometimes it is in the beauty that makes us catch our breath in wonder.

Teach us to recognise the signs of your kingdom in one another,
in those we least expect and those we overlook,
in acts of simple kindness and in steadfast hope.

Encourage us to open our eyes, our hearts and our minds
to the possibilities of your creative energy,
that encourages us to look beyond.
Grant us courage,
and teach us to love as you love us. Amen.

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