

“The Blessing of Diversity” – Mat 13:31-33,44-52

I note that governments, beginning with Norway and now Britain, are starting to legislate the demise of cars with gas or diesel engines. (So many questions flood my mind ... for example, is it better to drive an electric car for which the electricity was generated through a coal-fired steam boiler or gas turbine? Where will the funds to replace the current gas and diesel taxes come from – you know, those funds used to build and maintain roads and bike lanes? ... but I digress.) Fully-electric cars are becoming available, but for the moment the transition is being provided through the ‘hybrid’ – a vehicle that is mostly an electric car but with a small gas or diesel engine to both recharge the batteries and provide needed extra oomph for hills and acceleration, not to mention some decent range. This is a combination that provides improved fuel economy and reduced emissions without sacrificing too much in performance.

The automotive industry is not the only place where hybrids are being recommended; religion is another area where some argue in favour of combining or blending traditions and beliefs. Douglas Todd a while ago reviewed a book “In Praise of Mixed Religion” authored by William Harrison, an Anglican scholar who has taught at VST (Vancouver School of Theology) in which Harrison “argues pervasively that every religion, every world view, has been a mingling of convictions and practices.” His arguments include noting that early developing Christianity for example borrowed heavily from the societies and cultures it encountered as it spread out from Jerusalem and Judea. He is not alone in his views, as we recognize that even within our own traditions there have always been corresponding subtle but powerful pressures for a homogenized faith, for a uniformity of thought and practice and powerful pressures for conformity. Within certain branches of the Reformed Church, even within some congregations in our own denomination, those pressures are still strong.

While I recognize the validity of the arguments presented in Todd’s review, I cannot get “on board” with a total blending of beliefs and practices that removes all distinctions, in part because I believe the resulting religion would be so bland as to offer nothing that society in general doesn’t offer and in part because doing so would rob the church of the richness and the blessing that diversity offers. The article reminds me that we are engaged in a delicate balancing act in which the exclusiveness of fundamentalism needs to be overcome by an accepting liberalism but without losing core values. Our reading from Matthew’s gospel provides such a middle ground in which diversity is honoured as are the foundational values taught by Christ.

Over the past several weeks we have been looking at the parables in this great teaching section in Matthew’s gospel. The parable of the seeds sown on differing soils and the parable of the wheat and the weeds intermixed were two clearly structured parables, each with a full explanation. By contrast today we finish this section of Matthew’s gospel with a collage, a collection of very brief, self-contained, somewhat separate little parables. They are dissimilar; they use a wide range of elements as their example; and at first glance they seem to lack a common theme. The one thing they do share, however, is that they all address the question, “what is the kingdom of heaven like?” We need to recall that in Matthew’s gospel the term “kingdom of heaven” is synonymous with “kingdom of God”, that is to say Jesus is speaking about God’s kingdom, not providing a glimpse into some region beyond the sky. What kind of a glimpse do we then get of that earthly holy kingdom? We get a not one view, but a multi-faceted view through a set of parables that reveals the kingdom is more diverse than is often acknowledged.

The first parable is the well-known comparison to a mustard seed. The seed itself is of course exceedingly tiny and yet the plant into which it grows can reach ‘as high as an elephant’s

eye', or at least the eye of a person on horseback! The parable is clear enough; we can easily understand that the kingdom is a place in which the tiniest of beginnings can result in the largest of outcomes. This is a word of hope against the all-too-often despairing cry of "what's the use?" when we feel that our efforts don't make a noticeable difference. It is a reminder that with the nourishment of the Spirit even the smallest bit of faith can grow and even the teensiest bit of love can blossom.

The next parable is a bit of a surprise. A surprise to Jesus' hearers, perhaps, that he would use the most common of household items – yeast – to describe something as profound as the kingdom of God. But even more of a surprise that he would use yeast, since that leavening agent was sometimes used as an example of evil at work in a group (cf. Mt 16:6). However, here Jesus uses yeast as a much more positive prototype. Anyone who has made bread, or watched it being made, can recognize what Jesus was implying. The gentle, gradual influence of the yeast working in the dough, lifting and shaping the lifeless lumps into pliable, great-smelling and great-tasting objects to be treasured and shared! There's an image of gentleness here as well, learned quickly from your Mom or any other baker should you be incautious enough to slam the door. The kingdom is sweet-smelling, great-tasting, gently inspired by relentless but soft actions. A kind word here, a cup of refreshing cold water there, letting the bread of life rise and expand.

The treasure in the field is also a bit of a surprise, but only if we allow ourselves to get caught up in the ethical issues of hiding something in a field and then buying it. Paired with the next one, about the pearl of great value, Jesus presents two radically different but complementary views of the kingdom. In one, the discovery is accidental, stumbled upon and fortunately recognized; in the other the discovery is the result of a long and careful search. Two totally different approaches to describing the kingdom, but with a common theme: both discoveries are of such profound and magnificent value that they are worth trading in all of one's fortunes to possess. Whether the kingdom is recognized in a burst of sudden joyful awareness intruding into one's life, or the end result of a lifetime of hard and faithful striving and searching, or any of the uncountable ways in between, the kingdom of God is embraced by those who recognize it and in turn it embraces them.

The net thrown into the sea expands that concept even further, for as the recognition in the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value is somewhat active, here the entry into the kingdom is much more passive, even if accompanied by much wiggling, squirming and resisting! I'm sure that Matthew delighted in including this parable from the many that Jesus spoke, as it beats with Matthew's favourite drum of a sorting out at the end of the age. And we must recognize that some who resist being swept up into the net will get their wish and will be culled out, because that net sweeps far and wide, gathering the suspecting, the unsuspecting, juicy salmon and bottom feeders alike! But remember, this is not the total picture of the kingdom, just one more facet, one more way in which a wide diversity of people are brought into the kingdom, through a wide diversity of ways.

"Have you understood all this?" Jesus asks his disciples. "Oh, yes!" they dutifully reply and he gives them one closing comment on the kingdom, or at least upon those who would proclaim it. While Matthew reports on some strong criticisms that Jesus had for the scribes ("woe to you, scribes and Pharisees ...!") he also quotes Jesus with some very favorable comments about scribes, this being one of them. Here, the scribes trained for the kingdom are compared to a householder who brings out of his treasure both new and old. A word of emphasis that the kingdom is something new, that the ground rules had changed. But also a word of

caution, that the kingdom is not something totally new, but is founded and grounded in the old. God, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, had established his kingdom from of old, but was here re-establishing it through his Son, the Christ.

So we have here a collage, a collection of understandings of the kingdom and a collection of understandings of how people would come to be part of the kingdom. A wide and diverse set of ways by which people would be grafted into the kingdom, reflecting the wide and diverse range of people who would so grafted in. Not one pattern only, but a whole range, including the active who are seeking or discovering. Including also the passive, gathered in long before they suspected. Gathering in people whose faith was so tiny at the beginning as to be almost invisible but whose faith becomes a pillar of strength to them and to others. Collecting both people who gently and consistently cause the bread to rise and people who flop around in the net. These diverse peoples are all part of the kingdom.

What a message of hope for you and me, isn't it? Somewhere in all of that diversity we can recognize ourselves, I think. I would hope that you can see yourself much more towards the pearl in the oyster than just this side of a cold, dead fish, but most importantly I pray that you can see yourself as a vital part of the kingdom. (Someone once noted to me that whenever we worry about how un-kingdom-like we sometimes feel, it's good to remember that an oyster will not grow a pearl until there is something that irritates it, like a grain of sand and that little irritant is buried in the center of the pearl!) We need to celebrate our diversity, to rejoice in this assurance that although we are so different and have come to faith in so many different ways, that we are all part of the kingdom. Like the wise scribes, we also need to hear the word of caution also that we should continue to celebrate the diversity of others and recognize that the kingdom is for all, active and passive, seeking and stumbling, tiny seed or helpful tree. We must continue to both recognize and celebrate that the net of the kingdom catches all kinds and to remember that it will all get sorted out later.

A collection of parables, a miscellany that provides a view of the kingdom that is like a diamond, with many facets providing ways for the light to shine out. Diverse people, entering the kingdom in diverse ways. A kingdom diverse enough to accept us. That is definitely reason for celebration and counting our blessings!