

# Proper 12

30.07.2017  
By Janet Foggie

## Introduction

One sentence unites the three parables we are going to look at this week, 'The kingdom of heaven is like this.' In first century politics there were varying models of government, the Roman Republic, the Empire, Greek city-based democracy, and kings and queens, princeling states and puppet states. It seems unlikely that Jesus' listeners would have a single idea of what a 'kingdom' is any more than we could expect a mixed group of people in our modern world to simply understand the concept of government without some discussion of country, location, history and politics.

Before reading the text maybe take some time to reflect on the word 'kingdom'. Is it a word that always speaks of masculinity to you? Is it a word that speaks of power? Is it a word that speaks of freedom to you? Does it bring to mind fairy-tales and castles? Or a term belonging only to history? Has it become something only of faith in your mind? Or is it a word which still has political relevance to you?

Do you live in a kingdom?

What does that mean for you?

Do you ever disagree with others about political boundaries, or issues?

How do those disagreements affect you; do you feel there is a cost to them?

How helpful for you is grounding a text like this in a political metaphor?

Now take some time to read the text through, as often as required, to think upon Jesus' actual words

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## Text

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."..He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

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## Comment

Each parable is a single metaphor. In each case, there is a positive ending, and the basic ideas of gardening, cooking, and treasure-hunting are positive in their force. In the first two parables the emphasis is on growth. In the third is on discovery and ownership. The shift in emphasis is caused by the telling of the parable of the weeds which we examined in more detail last week. In order then, to look at these three metaphors we should remember their placing in the gospel of Matthew as well as their meaning; theoretically, as separate sections of text, and personally, to each one of us.

We began our consideration by thinking about the word kingdom. Has your initial thought process been affected by reading the text? At times of political disagreement, change or uncertainty does the idea of God's kingdom help or hinder good debate? Is a kingdom in this world something you can own, like a hidden treasure, or is Jesus pointing to an opposition of ideas here?

These texts are often read as relating to the church. We might find it helpful to ask the question; is the 'kingdom' in Jesus' words the same as the 'church' in our current society? When we think of God's kingdom growing, like the mustard plant or the rising loaf of bread, is this directly referring to 'church growth' as we might understand it? Jesus was concerned about the spiritual kingdom, in the world. How far is that spiritual kingdom the same as, part of, or distinct from our idea of

church?

Is there mystery in growth? What makes the mustard seed or the batch of dough rise? How would this have seemed to first century audiences? What thoughts does it bring forth in us today? Do we have more of a social pressure towards growth? In the stock market, the world of work, the church? Is that how Jesus and his audience thought about growing things?

Think for a moment about the parable of the weeds – what stood out last week? What is the strongest memory of that material and the response to it? The weeds grew quickly and by the hand of ‘an enemy’ or ‘the evil one’. Jesus is clearly not suggesting all growth is good. Between the mustard seed and the wheat and the weeds there are three models of growth, two good and one evil. We thought then about our ability to judge people, who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ and the need to leave many of our judgements aside, what strikes this week about the growth of the kingdom? Does it too transcend our ordinary judgements?

Following these metaphors of growth, and the story Jesus tells of God’s judgement being beyond human time, we come to the idea of the hidden treasure. It follows logically that the lack of ability of humans to judge the growth of the kingdom (or of weeds) in the hearts of others, so too we often ‘find’ the kingdom in a secret, surprising, or unlooked for way. The person who finds the field does not tell anyone about it, and ‘is so happy’ that that individual goes and sells everything they have, and, ‘then goes back and buys that field.’ In this story the happiness of finding the treasure is connected to the inability of the individual who found it to value it in normal terms. It is worth everything.

The secret treasure, buried in the field, provides a contrast to the mustard seed, planted in the ground. What are the salient points of difference for you? Both describe the kingdom, but one is, buried, secret, unique, priceless – the other is planted, in full view, small, and yet grows.

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## Response

### ACTION

Follow one of these parables in a deliberate action of reflection:

Buy a packet of mustard seeds and plant them according to the instructions on the packet, and think about it growing. Jesus says, “It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.” Is that true of mustard plants? What did his audience hear when he said that? Was it comic in effect? Did they laugh? Or was the spiritual meaning of the metaphor more important than the biological reality of mustard plants?

Buy some instant yeast and bake a loaf of bread following the recipe on the box. What does it feel like to watch the dough rise? How does the experience of making the bread help reflection on the nature of God’s kingdom? Does it seem there is a mystery in the process?

### REFLECTION

Think about what is the secret treasure in your own life. Maybe there was a time in your life you had a secret, a new job, expecting a child, a new purchase, a new relationship, which you kept a secret for a reason. Just as many brides don’t like to reveal their wedding dress till the ‘big day’ or couples don’t want to reveal their choices of baby names until the child is born or a happy same-sex couple might not find it easy to tell family or friends that they are together. If you had an experience like that, why did you keep your secret? What were the consequences? Was everyone in that situation happy? When can secrets hurt? What is their force and meaning for you? If the kingdom of God is like a secret that makes us so happy we would sell everything, then that is a fact of spiritual conflict in our world. What

does it feel like to live with that truth?

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## Prayer

God of the mustard seed,  
whose hidden kingdom grows in the smallest of us,  
grow your kingdom in me,  
that I may spread huge loving branches of hope for all whom I meet this day,  
so that the secret growth of heaven may be a little greater in our world.  
Amen

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Justice