

## **'Mystery and surprise: Jesus and his parables are one!'**

Sermon by Mark Pilgrim. Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

Broadchurch; McMafia; The Bodyguard. Three TV drama series that got the country talking and wondering. Which viewer didn't, at one point or another, ask themselves 'How is this story going to end?'. And when the series came to their dramatic conclusions, how many viewers said, 'I didn't see that coming!'. In Broadchurch, Olivia Coleman starred as a policewoman where the surprise was her own husband turned out to be the villain. In McMafia, James Norton's central character surprised everyone by going to the dark side and becoming a baddie himself. And in The Bodyguard there was deep mystery about who the terrorists were; and then the big surprise was that the mastermind was a young woman we assumed was a victim and oppressed, but turned out, in fact, to be the technical expert behind the whole plot.

Mystery – 'How is the story going to end?': Surprise – 'I didn't see that coming!...' both these elements appear not only in modern-day drama; they are also key to first century parables. It's amazing how these elements of mystery and surprise can appear in parables with just a handful of words.

Take the parable of the mustard seed. Look out for mystery and surprise. Start with the known facts. Mustard seeds are tiny and normally grow into bushes about six, occasionally nine feet high. In Jesus' time mustard bushes were pernicious and liable to ruin cultivated land, a bit like yellow ragwort in meadows or Japanese knot weed in gardens today. So when Jesus says the sower deliberately sowed mustard seed in his field, we would expect the people of his time to be mystified and ask, like TV viewers today 'How is this story going to end?' After this surprise, there is a second. Jesus says this mustard bush becomes a tree large enough for birds to nest in its branches. But growth like that turns all accepted facts on their head. Mustard seeds just don't do that. They grow to 2, perhaps 3 metres – but they never became trees large enough for birds to nest in. Jesus' listeners were almost bound to say they didn't see that conclusion coming. The parable would have left them scratching their heads, reviewing the details and wondering what surprising growth and providing hospitality to alien creatures had to do with the kingdom of heaven.

Now let's look at the parable of the yeast. What are the facts? Did the cuisine of biblical times use yeast a lot? Not if they could help it! They cooked their bread, remember, 'unleavened' – without yeast. Like mustard plants, yeast was pernicious stuff, its influence being far greater than its size would suggest. Once in contact with something it could interact with positively, it could spread, change and transform its host environment. As Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven being like yeast taken by a woman, there is first a mystery. Why does he say the woman 'hid' the yeast in the flour? And then there's the surprise. Why was she cooking so much of it? Three measures of flour would have made enough bread, apparently, for 100 to 150 people. This cook was clearly preparing for a feast or banquet, rather than for the needs of her own family. And this yeast, hidden in this huge quantity of flour transforms it all. The parable of the yeast only takes 27 words to tell. But mystery and surprise are both shoehorned into it.

The parables of the treasure and the pearl next up in our Gospel passage continue the theme of the kingdom of heaven being a place of mystery and surprise. Through them all Jesus is teaching us that the kingdom of heaven is an upside down place, a place where the mysterious and surprising is normal. The kingdom of heaven, he is saying, is a place where human beings should expect the unexpected.

Take the parable of the treasure. Here the kingdom of heaven is likened to a place where, mysteriously and surprisingly, the finder of treasure doesn't immediately celebrate. No: like the woman in the parable of the yeast, the finder of treasure hides the object in the parable away for a while. Only when he has made a big sacrifice and extravagantly sold all his assets to buy the treasure and acquire it legitimately can the man's heart rest. What's going on? Why hide the treasure? Why sell everything to buy the whole field? What does this tell us about the activity of God and the establishment of his reign of love on earth?

Then, says Jesus, the upside down, mysterious, surprising kingdom of heaven is like an expert purveyor of pearls, mysteriously and surprisingly, sacrificing the entirety of his possessions to possess the one pearl that

was infinitely valuable and precious to him. It's an act of extravagance which defies all logic: it's a story designed, in a very few well-chosen words, to get people asking, 'What on earth is going on?'

I am hoping that all I have said so far is re-enforcing something I said last week. Parables are not allegories. Parables are different. Jesus' parables are pithy stories designed to act as metaphors to shed light on the kingdom of God. What we are doing today is treating Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven as originally intended. They are down to earth stories full of mystery and surprise which themselves evoke and embody the mystery and surprise experienced when ordinary people, ordinary people like you and me, authentically encounter the down to earth kingdom of God.

I myself have encountered a mystery and experienced a delightful surprise in writing this sermon. It lies in an observation Stanley Hauerwas, an Anglican theologian I have mentioned a couple of times before, makes on this whole area of theology. His suggestion is that Jesus is a kind of parable in his own right. Jesus, he suggests, is the embodiment of the mystery-filled, surprising, upside down sovereign rule God invites everyone and everything in Creation to acknowledge and enjoy as a gift and outworking of divine love. His proposition is encapsulated in these 8 words: 'Jesus is the parable of God, the Father'. As Hauerwas himself writes: 'the speaker of the parables and the parables spoken are one'. Support for this interpretation, that Jesus is himself a kind of parable to end all parables, because of the mystery he leads us into and the amount of surprise he engenders in us, may be gleaned from a small detail I highlighted in our review of two parables. The yeast which spread mightily was said to be 'hidden' by the woman in the flour. And the man who found treasure 'hid' the treasure once he had first found it. The new insight I want to share with you, the delightful surprise to communicate, is that, in the same way as the woman hid her yeast and the treasure finder hid his treasure, God 'hides' his rule, hides his kingdom in the person of Jesus. And Jesus, as the Son of God, was aware of that and found a way to express it. The mystery of God's incarnation is that God's love is fully revealed in Jesus – but human beings in Jesus' time and since have failed fully to appreciate this. The truth of God is so deep, so mysterious, so surprising that we still haven't and still can't take it all in. The paradox and the challenge is that God's love and God's truth is always fully available to us in Jesus. But it's also hidden: we either cannot or will not accept it unreservedly.

This insight, I can see, can take some getting round. How can a person and a collection of stories be the same thing? But if the key element of both the person of Jesus and the stories he tells is that they reveal the ever mysterious, the ever surprising love of God, then maybe the suggestion that the two are one, that both point to God as a Trinity of grace isn't far-fetched but makes perfect sense.

Remember the TV programmes we mentioned at the start of this sermon - Broadchurch, McMafia and The Bodyguard? Both they and Jesus' parables of the kingdom evoke these two responses: in respect of mystery 'How is the story going to end?' and in respect of surprise 'I didn't see that coming!' But it's not only the parables that incorporate and evoke mystery and surprise: Jesus himself – the parable of the Father – does exactly the same thing.

What does this mean for us today? It means each of us asking 'What part can I play in developing the Christian story and helping to build God's kingdom further?' and then committing ourselves to respond in down to earth practical ways. It means each of us being alert and attentive to the surprises the inbreaking of God's kingdom will inevitably produce in and around us. It's tempting to ask 'If you're not being surprised, for instance by new life coming out of death in some circumstance or situation around you, then are you actually in the right place with God?' Mystery and surprise are so fundamental to the nature of God and to our experience of God, we should be aware of them almost all the time – and that's what the parables in our Gospel passage today teach us.

Now let's pray:

God of the Big Story, we thank you for enfolding us in the pages of your love. Thank you for inspiring the Gospel writers to set before us the mystery and surprise constantly to be found in Jesus and the parables he told. May we continue to enjoy the mystery of your love and surprise at your presence in the days ahead. Amen.