

Proper 12, Ordinary 17A
So good it must be true
Romans 8.26-39 | Matthew 13.31-33,44-52

“This is too good to be true!” I wonder if you’ve ever thought or said that, or heard it from someone else? I think many of us feel that the truest, most “realistic” belief about life is that it’s difficult and full of dashed hopes. Any news that brings unexpected delight or joy is then suspected as a fairy tale. We have to be careful not to get our hopes up.

I guess that this outlook comes from many people’s personal experience. When we’re children, films and stories all have a happy ending, and then we grow up to discover that lots of things don’t end happily, and that some endings are very grim indeed. That can make us pretty suspicious of good news, looking for the catch or the strings attached to the excellent or the hopeful. We go looking for the fly in the ointment, and we are inclined to dismiss the promises of God’s kingdom as merely wish fulfilment.

Even those of us with “glass half full” outlooks on life would probably look around the world just now and struggle to imagine a stunning reversal is on its way. So we lower our expectations, and limit our hopes to small and predictable changes and the natural pendulum swings of history.

But both of today’s readings, from Matthew’s Gospel and from St Paul’s letter to the Romans, absolutely insist that the saving work of God is not only true but also wilder than any of our attempts to imagine a better life or a better world. The truth of what God is up to is astonishing and strange in its goodness – more abundant, and more surprising, than the gradual or incremental processes of improvement we tend to expect. The kingdom of heaven is transformative and revolutionary in its effects.

In normal circumstances, mustard seeds don't actually grow into large trees. Jesus' parable doesn't just draw on the miracle of how tiny seeds transform into plants, but *also* the suggestion that God's kingdom is so radical that it's like a mustard seed giving rise to something large enough for birds to nest in.¹

Likewise, the leaven in the dough is a recognisable process, but what householder is making bread with three measures of flour? That's enough, apparently, to feed about forty people. This woman is not just making her daily bread, she's throwing a banquet.

The man who found the treasure hidden in a field, and the merchant searching for fine pearls don't just find something good, they find something so utterly life-changing that they "sell all they have," to be in on it. Their discoveries and their delight are excessive, over the top.

Beyond that, God's abundance is *indiscriminate* – it's not reserved for the deserving, the religious and the good. The net of God's transforming kingdom catches up all the fish in its path – the good news is for everyone, nobody misses out. And while at the end of all things this inclusiveness might require a reckoning, some sifting of what we have done with the gifts we've been given, there is no barrier to receiving this extraordinary blessing in the first place. Judgement comes at the end, not at the point of invitation.

St Paul constantly tried to hammer home this awareness in his writings, and we hear that in today's reading from Romans. Paul wants us to know that none of us finds our own way to God, or achieves communion with God, through our own efforts, decency or even luck. In Christ, God has done for us what none of us can do for ourselves. And God's desire to be with us is purposeful – God does it all – not leaving anything to chance, or for us to get right – not even prayer. It's all gift, and it's so complete, so absolute, that not even death, let alone any of the horrors of this life, can prevent us from being held in this 'withness' that God has intended for us.

¹ This and the following observation draw on Andrew McGovern's commentary on this passage

Surely, this is too good to be true? Surely, we must have to bring something to the table, surely, it must be possible to fundamentally fail at this business of living? Well sure, if you define success the way the world defines it – hitting the right life milestones, being physically and mentally healthy, being thought well of, having a home and family and all the stuff you want and need. Understood this way many people are “failing.”

But, even then, *in all things* God is weaving and working together the circumstances of reality toward the good. And God’s vision of the good is so extraordinary that when it breaks through, you can recognise it by its laughter. The laughter of something unlooked for, unexpected, but better than anyone imagined.

This may not occur in the lifetime arc of every individual – sometimes people die without ever seeing God’s transformation in their experience. And we need to remember that Scripture tends to address itself to communities – particularly poor and struggling communities – not necessarily to individual persons in every instance.

But there are enough examples, through history and in the story of humanity’s struggle against sin and oppression, to remind us what unfathomable riches can spring up from small and quiet faithfulness in this life.

Beginning with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to things like Rosa Parks getting uppity on a bus, to previously unimaginable acts of reconciliation and forgiveness in places like South Africa and Northern Ireland, to the discovery of vaccines and penicillin, to the emergence of renewable energy. God’s work is hidden until it’s not, and in that moment there is decisive and profound change.

Herbert Butterfield, a historian writing after World War 2, said that “one of the clearest and most concrete facts of history is that [people] of *spiritual resources* may not only redeem catastrophe, but turn it into a grand creative moment.”

Bringing a creative newness out of catastrophe - Jesus’ parables teach us that this is what *God is always doing*. And the means God uses are people of “spiritual resources.” What are these resources? *The imagination to believe in and work toward things that are “too good to be true.”* The faithfulness to persevere with unimpressive and under-valued tasks. The spiritual insight to recognise and get among the non-obvious transforming work of God in our communities and neighbourhoods.

It is clear that many of the people messing up the world just now have squandered their “spiritual resources.” It was ever thus – those who fight to get their hands on the levers of power generally have no conscience left by the time they get there. But that doesn’t mean that God is absent. God is transforming the mustard seed into a shady tree that will stretch out sheltering branches, God is leavening flour to create a feast for all the hungry, God is guiding seekers to hidden discoveries that will heal what is lost and broken in our world, and God is praying in us from the secret dwelling place of the Spirit within.

It’s a mistake to think we are ever so grown up we can leave fairy tales behind. Because they hint at the reality that is baked into our universe and expressed most fully in the gospel of Jesus Christ: that the dawn rises at the time of greatest darkness, that hideous brokenness can be miraculously transformed, that losses can be restored, and that after what feels like fruitless searching, love will find us, and find a way. It’s not “too good to be true.” We can trust its truth, because our hearts are wired to instinctively recognise its goodness even if we’ve been told we must “grow out of” that instinct. And the Day is coming when all we long for – the Day of “happily ever after” – will be revealed to the glory of God.

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