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Like last Sunday, this Sunday we continue to wade through Matthew's parable section, as we will again next Sunday. Last week Prakash spoke about how parables functioned for Jesus' auditors as stories that were drawn from everyday life. The use of parables, according to James Dunn, was both a unique and defining feature of Jesus' ministry. Parables were not a traditional way to hand over teaching in Judaism. And though Jesus is fondly remembered in the synoptic Gospel accounts for his use of parables, it doesn't seem that his followers continued the parable tradition. We do not find them in Paul or in the other epistles, or the apocrypha or in the apostolic tradition. Yet there are 46 parables found in the shared tradition.

Another defining feature of Jesus' ministry, according to Dunn, was the "kingdom of heaven." Jesus entire "preaching ministry can be summed up in terms of his proclamation of the kingdom of God." But again, we don't here much about the kingdom/reign of heaven/God after Jesus. There is some reference to the kingdom in Paul, but its scant, and it does not have the sense of presence and urgency that it did in Jesus' preaching.

So in hearing the three parables today, we come into very close contact with Jesus in these two very distinctive features of his ministry: teaching through parables and the kingdom of heaven. We already have some background from previous chapters in Matthew to help to inform us about what Jesus is talking about when he refers to the kingdom of heaven in today's parables:

- the sowing activity has to do with the proclamation of the kingdom;
- the kingdom grows, it is creative, it can be abundant;
- there is opposition and resistance to the kingdom;
- the harvest refers to a judgment, and/or eschatology

Last week's parable had to do with the type of ground the seeds of the kingdom fell upon, and what type of ground produced a harvest. This week the sower sows good seed in good ground, but an enemy sows weeds among the wheat in the dark of night. Matthew is referring not just to any weed, but to the "darnel" or "cockle." This weed was a serious problem for wheat cultivators until the modern era. Darnel weed roots intertwine with the wheat and looks just like it. Only when the wheat and darnel plants



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are mature can you tell them apart. Once mature, the head of the wheat, heavy with grain, droops while the (empty-headed) darnel head stands upright. So it's a bit of a mystery why the slaves eagerly asked to gather the weeds, unless they had no previous experience of wheat cultivation—which seems unlikely.

If we had read the next part of the lection, we would have read Jesus' explanation of the parable, but then I would have been out of a job, so we didn't read it. Consistent with previous understandings, Jesus explains the parable to his disciples: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the Angels." Well that accounts for just about everyone except...

The slaves: who are the slaves in the story? Might they be the disciples, or followers, or anyone who hears the word? And if so, what is their role in all of this? I'm not sure about you, but I identified with the slaves. And I thought I had a part to play in this parable about the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is an elegance in this parable. Using simple language and imagery, Jesus points to the complexity of this in-between time, this time in-between the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven in the preaching of Jesus and its completion at the end of time. A time when the kingdom is present and yet meets opposition and resistance. Sometimes what looks like the Kingdom of Heaven turns out to be a weed.

In the two parables that follow, the mustard seed and the leaven, Jesus points to the potential and powerful presence of the kingdom. The tiny, mustard seed that grows into a tall, scrappy weed that takes over a garden. Or the seemingly imperceptible yeast work into 3 measures of flour, one measure enough to feed a hundred people. A kingdom of creative potential and abundance in nourishment, yet one that remains often imperceptible, hidden, small, etc.



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As much as Jesus points to the complexity of history, he also relativizes our place within it. Contrary to our desire to be at the center of the story, to weed the garden, to grow the seed of the kingdom, to mix the yeast into the flour, Jesus consistently places God at the center of the story. The kingdom established by Jesus in his preaching ministry is gift to all of us. Like those slaves, we may be eager to shape and grow the kingdom in certain ways, always with full of good will. Instead, Jesus invites us to be shaped and molded by the kingdom he left us in his preaching and witness. We give ourselves over to the kingdom of heaven in an act of faith and trust in its power.

Fr. Darren Dias, O.P.