

In today's Gospel reading, we have some parables in which Jesus compares Kingdom of Heaven to earthly things we can see and understand. The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, that nevertheless grows into the greatest of shrubs. The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that leavens three measures of flour. You may notice that the Gospels use the phrases "Kingdom of God" and "Kingdom of Heaven" interchangeably. They mean generally the same thing. There is no Kingdom of Heaven without the presence of God. And there is no presence of God without the Kingdom of Heaven. Wherever God is, Heaven is there also.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not necessarily *only* a place, or a location that has physical dimensions. The popular view is that when you die you go "up there" somewhere, somehow and check in at the "Pearly Gates". But the truth is that the Kingdom of Heaven means the unimpaired, complete and fully realized presence of Almighty God. We say that God is "in heaven" when the truth is that Heaven is in God.

We tend to think of God as being "in heaven" while we're "down here" on earth. In the Nicene Creed even, we say that Jesus "came down" from Heaven and became incarnate from the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then we go on to say that he suffered death and was buried, but rose again on the third day and "ascended into heaven". But when we say that Jesus "came down" from heaven, we don't mean that he dropped in like a man with a parachute. Nor do we mean, when we say that he "ascended" into heaven that he drifted upwards like a man in a hot air balloon. His coming down from and ascending to heaven are meant to be understood in qualitative terms, not as physical, vertical movements. In St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, he tells how Jesus "emptied himself" and took the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. Jesus' coming down to earth

means that he voluntarily took on a lesser state of being. His coming down meant that he brought divinity down to humanity. When God became a human being, the kingdom of heaven came to earth.

Matthew is telling us that Almighty God is present in this world in the person of Jesus Christ. In the third chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we're introduced to John the Baptist. John the Baptist's role was to be a herald of the coming of Christ. Once Jesus had come, and was about to begin his earthly ministry, John the Baptist announced to the people of Judea that Jesus was here. But notice his words. He tells the people of Judea "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

Jesus himself uses the same words in chapter 4 of Matthew's Gospel, when he begins his earthly ministry.

Mark and Luke have Jesus telling people that the Kingdom of God has come near. In John's Gospel Jesus tells us that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again; and that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and of Spirit.

Now that Almighty God has become incarnate and entered the world in the person of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven has begun here on earth. Heavenly operations are now underway. Now that Jesus is here, the Kingdom of heaven is here also.

And here in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us through parables, something of what that means.

There are several themes that Jesus touches on regarding Kingdom of heaven. One is that the Kingdom of Heaven is present on the earth and is working through the lowly, going mostly unnoticed by the world. This is perhaps what Jesus meant when in John's Gospel he says that you cannot see the Kingdom of God unless you are born again. Those for whom the reality of God has not yet come alive within

them do not see that the Kingdom of heaven has come near and is alive and well on the earth.

The world recognizes a material kingdom, but no godly kingdom. The unbelieving world acknowledges the presence of the Church, but treats it as if it were really just a very small, insignificant thing, *like a mustard seed*. Yet the truth is that one day the kingdom of heaven will be revealed in all its splendor and unimaginable greatness. It belongs to the nature of the Kingdom of heaven that from something so seemingly small and unimportant, something that appears to the world as trivial, the totally unexpected can and will come.

There is a great mystery about the presence of the Kingdom of heaven on earth. It is here, but it is not yet fully realized. What ought to be the greatest event in all of human history, an event that ought to transform every heart and truly bring heaven to earth, instead goes largely unnoticed. Jesus is rejected and humiliated by so many people in the world that the glory that is rightly his and will one day be revealed to all, is currently obscured.

It is tragically ironic that people spend their lives desperately searching for fulfillment and happiness. Whatever happiness they do find is fleeting. The Kingdom of heaven is the only lasting reality. It is of such great value – literally there is nothing of greater value in existence – that those who are confronted by it will readily and joyfully make whatever sacrifice it takes to dwell in it. The sacrifice may be possessions, reputation, family, even life itself. Like a man who finds hidden treasure in a field and goes and sells all he has to buy that field. The kingdom of heaven means that much.

It is the nature of goodness to draw people to itself. Goodness attracts people. Say you want to buy a new car. What kind of car do you look for? A good one! If you want to go out for dinner, what kind of restaurant do you look for? A good

one! You want to read a book for enjoyment and relaxation. What kind of a book do you look for? A book on tax law? No! You look for a good novel!

Secondly, when we find something truly good, we can't help but tell others about it. How often have you told a friend, or had a friend tell you "you've got to try this restaurant" or "you have to read this book I finished the other day" or "hey I have to tell you about my new car I just bought. It's got everything". You want others to know about the good thing you've found. That's the nature of goodness.

Thirdly, when you find something good, you want more of it. You're going back to that restaurant for sure. You're going to read another book by that same author. The first one you read was so good, another would have to be good as well. What does an audience usually do at the end of a concert? They call for an encore. They want to hear more. We want more of a good thing.

Well, the Kingdom of heaven is the highest good there is. There is nothing above it, no greater good. It is the source of all goodness. The goodness of earthly things fades. How often do you hear someone say, "oh, that's no good anymore." Like milk beyond the expiration date.

Not so with the Kingdom of Heaven, the fully realized presence of Almighty God. That is goodness that never fades. That is goodness that truly lasts. That is goodness that ought to attract us more than any other. In the Kingdom of Heaven there is always more. God's kingdom will have no end. That is the pearl of great price.

But the Kingdom of Heaven is also like a catch of fish that the fishermen sort. The good are kept, but the bad are thrown out. Jesus ascended into Heaven and took his seat at the right hand of the Father. From there He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

The Kingdom of Heaven came to earth when Jesus was born. The Church began with a small, unnoticeable band of apostles. Look where it is today. The nature of the Kingdom is that like a mustard seed, it expands into the greatest thing there is. It is the best of things that lasts forever. Whatever good attracts you is only a hint of the greatest of all goods that awaits you in the Kingdom of Heaven.