

MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52
 THAT LIGHTBULB MOMENT

If I give you £30, how would you spend it? There has been an experiment carried out to discover what makes us happy. There were two parts to the experiment: first of all, you are invited to spend £30 on something that will save you time, to use the money to buy you more free time; so people spent £30 on buying lunches to be delivered to work, or paying for someone to do their house cleaning, or others to run messages for them, to free up more time to be with family or friends. Then secondly, you are invited to spend £30 on material things, clothes, books, wine, you are free to choose. Then the people who took part were asked which made them happier, spending money to buy them time, or spending money on things: the experiment discovered that those who spent money to buy themselves time rather than things were happier people.

This is all about what matters to us. What is important is not always something we can buy. What's in your attic or your garage? How much is it worth? So why have you not thrown it out? Because it matters to you, in some way or another. Garages are full of bits and pieces "that might come in handy some day!" Attics are full of children's books or projects, or boxes of photos and the like unless yours is different from ours. These things don't cost money, but they matter; they're important to us; we cherish these things because they remind us of people or events that matter in our lives. In a way, that is what the £30 experiment was also about – what makes us happy? What satisfies us in life? In its own way, it shows us that it is not always money and things that make us happiest. If we can use the picture, I wonder what is in the "national attic"; what is important to us as a nation, that we don't want to throw away? Are we in danger of throwing away important things from our national life?

The five parables that we're looking at from Matthew 13 are a group of stories that Jesus told about "the kingdom of heaven!" To make it easier, someone has described these as talking about "this is what it is like when God is at work". These parables describe what life is like when God is at work and when Jesus is king and they bring us to the conclusion - "how important is all of this to me?" Where does faith rate on our list of priorities? Where does Jesus come on the list of influences on our lives? It is easy to say that He comes top; or that the kingdom is our number one priority, but in the heat of the day, that is not always the case; the challenge is still there for all of us. So let's see what "it is like when God is at work" and how important this is to us.

"Little is great when God is at work" (Dick France) That would be true of both the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, but in different ways. It is an exaggeration to say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed or that it is the largest of plants, but the contrast is well-made. Small seed – large plant! Something small grows into something huge. The kingdom began in a small way, with twelve people and then some more and to begin with they were all in one place, centred on Jerusalem; then 3000 more are added on the day of Pentecost and others are added from other places, till the kingdom of God extends right across the planet, where people of every nation follow Jesus. That small seed has become the large tree and while we might be concerned that the kingdom in Scotland has stopped growing, there are still new people being added every day, even in Edinburgh!

"*The kingdom...*" (Matthew 13:33) The "whole batch of dough"? The books reckon this was enough to feed a hundred people and was made to work with only a little yeast. Yeast transforms; that is its job! Some of you will know that better than me! It goes through the whole batch and changes all the dough, not just a small bit! When God is at work, our faith grows. When God is at work, He transforms people inside and out; He changes the way we think, the way we speak, the way we behave; He changes the things that we find important and even the way we spend our time. Perhaps we don't want to be changed; maybe we're happy the way that we are, but God is at work to make us more and more like Jesus; He starts small but

the kingdom in us becomes bigger and bigger till it is all way through our lives and we become new people who think, speak and behave like Jesus.

So how important is all of this to us? The man who found the treasure, and the man who found the pearl, both ask us the same question: “how important is Jesus to us?” Both stories ask the question about what matters to us and neither of them is about being rich financially. The farmer finds a treasure chest and he is perfectly entitled to do what he did in his culture, to bury it and buy the field, but to do that he has to sell everything else! The dealer who finds the pearl of his life does the same; he sells everything in order to buy the pearl of his life. Here are two men for whom there was something that mattered more than anything else, something that changed their thinking; “this is what it is like when God is at work”. Something matters more than everything else and for Jesus that is the kingdom of God. The agony He faced in Gethsemane on the night before He died came because He knew the cost of how much the kingdom mattered to Him, and it was going to cost Him His life.

This is one of life’s big questions! We don’t ask it very often, but in fact the answer to it shapes all sorts of parts of our life. The answer to this question shapes our attitudes to almost everything, to the news, to the needs of the world. It shapes our relationships with other people, whether we relate to people in Jesus’ way or whether we are selfish and greedy and rude. It shapes the way we use our time, and our money; it shapes how we use our gifts and talents. All of these parts of our life are shaped by the answer to the question: “how important is Jesus to us?” Earlier, we told something of the story of Ian Macfarlane, a son of the manse in Juniper Green, and a doctor who died in the First World War. His father wrote a little book, with extracts of Ian’s letters home, but the first part tells his story. His colleagues in the hospital spoke about his enthusiasm and passion for caring for his patients, even to the cost of his own health and eventually his life. His father wrote of Ian’s chief joy – “Christ and the gospel!” What matters to us?

Jesus’ last parable shows us that this question is more than just academic; it shapes our destiny. We’re in territory that is not comfortable and is not popular, but that never stopped Jesus telling it as it is! The story is of the fishing net that been drawn in from the lake, full of fish. There are some fish that are good – fish they can sell at market, big fish perhaps - and they are collected in baskets. There are bad fish, what is left over – unsellable, small fish, fish that people won’t eat - and they are thrown away. There will come a time when God will judge the world and the righteous and the wicked will be separated, the righteous to be with God in glory and the wicked to be separate from God and grace forever. It is not for us to know who is which; that’s for God to judge, but there is a deep reality of judgement here that we can’t ignore. We complain that the wicked seem to have the upper hand in the world, that they go unpunished, that they become rich and powerful by their evil deeds – but that will not last forever! “This is what it is like when God is at work!”

Going back to the £30 experiment, I find it a fascinating question – how to spend £30? I heard some people interviewed on BBC News in response to this story and most of them said they would spend it on time away, or on wine, with a chance to spend time with family and friends. We live in a culture that is very much “me-first” and we have the impression of people whose main concern is for themselves and being happy and satisfied. They discount church and Christian faith as having nothing to offer on that notion. The mission of the church in Scotland is to show people around us that we do have something good to offer the world and that when Jesus is at work, there are lots of good things He brings to our life. The Church’s job is to remind people that faith matters, that God has not gone away and that Jesus brings wisdom and grace to lost and broken lives. In the “national attic” it would be easy simply to throw away notions of faith and push Jesus out of the national view of life, making the church seem less and less relevant. That would be a mistake. It is easy for us as Christians to simply merge into the background and become like everyone else; that is a much more comfortable place for us to be; but the challenge for us as church is to remind people how important Jesus is, and the

gospel is, and invite people to embrace Him and let His grace work its way into our bones. How good that is for us!

Have you ever had one of these lightbulb moments? A time when all of a sudden something has become clear to you? It might be something big, a life-changing moment; it might be something small – how the washing machine works, or your phone! Maybe there will be some light-bulb moments for you this week. For the people who heard these stories from Jesus, maybe there was a light-bulb moment for them too: “now I see – this is what life is all about; this is what really matters in my life; this is what things are really like when God is at work!” Maybe this morning has been a light-bulb moment for you; for the first time, you’ve realised how important it is to love and follow Jesus!

What is important in your life? Where does faith fit into that picture? Where does Jesus fit? When God is at work, is your faith growing? Are you becoming more like Jesus? What can you do to make that happen more? How important is your faith to you? Can’t live without faith? Take it or leave it? These are big questions; maybe there will be some light-bulb moments for you this week; you might find good answers to these questions. “This is what it is like when God is at work!”