

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

Today's Gospel readings are all about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, it grows from tiny seeds and when it blossoms it becomes so large that birds and all manner of animals can shade in its branches. It is like yeast, when added to dough it causes it to rise in unimaginable ways. It is like treasure in a field or a pearl of immeasurable value, so precious that you would sell everything you have to obtain it. It is like a net, so vast that everything will be caught in it, but, we are told, not everything will be retained, for only goodness and love can continue for all eternity. The kingdom of heaven is beyond our wildest dreams and yet within our grasp, unable to be fully understood or comprehended but still of more value to us than all worldly wealth.

I would also like to suggest that when you look more deeply, today's readings are also about the vastness of God's love. The very essence of heaven is that love, with the God of love sitting at its centre surrounding all things.

So, let's see if we can grasp a little of what God's love might be like. For only then, can we hope to get a clearer picture of what heaven might be like.

An American Pastor called Tim Zingale tells a story of God as judge.

He says: 'I would like you to picture yourself standing before the throne of God, in his law court. God is the judge, Satan is the prosecutor, and you are the defendant waiting to be tried for the things you did or did not do in this life. Satan then calls witness after witness against you and your head sinks low in shame as you remember some of the things you have done, and some of the things you should have done but didn't. Satan calls before you all those people you gossiped about, those people you didn't accept because they were different from you. Satan calls before you a hungry boy who needed food, but you were too busy to pay attention, too busy with your own needs, your own interests, your own little world.

'Then comes a lonely widow that you were too busy to visit. The parade of witnesses goes on and on. Finally, all of your sins of omission and commission have been vividly exposed before the court and you are wishing you could crawl into a hole somewhere and hide.

'God asks you if you have anything to say on your own behalf. For a moment you think of all of the excuses you might be able to give for your behaviour, or how you might play the part of the smart lawyer and turn it around to make others look like the

guilty party, and so get yourself off. But then you realize how futile that would be before God.

‘You swallow hard and begin shaking your head, "No God, I don't have anything to say in my defence.

‘Impressed by your honesty and introspection, Jesus Christ appears as your counsel for the defence. He stands up and approaches the bench. He makes one simple statement: "This one trusted in me. I have paid the penalty for their sins."

‘Without further comment the judge announces your acquittal and you walk out of the court into God's everlasting kingdom.’

This first picture shows us the love that Jesus has for us. He paid the price for our sins. This is another thing that goes way beyond our understanding on so many levels, but what we do know is that He went to the cross so that our sins, all those things that we have committed and those things we should have done but didn't, can be forgiven us.

Another example of God's love for us is seen in another modern parable I came across recently – written by Betty Van Dyke.

A blind girl met a clown for the first time. Since she had been blind from birth and had never seen a clown, she got to know him in the only way possible.

She tentatively traced his hair, face, big ears, funny clothing and large nose with her very sensitive and well-trained fingers. As she investigated, she asked him questions and he answered her.

In his own way, he explained to her that because of his funny face and crazy clothes, he often made children laugh and that made him very happy indeed.

After completing her finger-walking investigation of the clown, she suddenly threw her arms around him and hugging him tightly said, "I love you."

Even though she could not see the clown, she could sense that he was a person who was loveable and that he loved her in his own unique way.

In this modern parable of the blind girl and the clown, we see another side of God's love for us through Jesus Christ. For in a sense, we are the blind girl and the clown is God's love shown through Jesus. We explore that love but we do not quite fully understand it.

We cannot fully understand or fully appreciate the love that God has for us through Jesus. As St Paul describes in 1 Corinthians, we currently see in a mirror dimly, but one day we will see it clearly. One day, we will fully understand and see that gracious love God has for us.

We see signs of God's love through Jesus in Scripture, in the Sacraments, in the Church he inaugurated, and in the love others have for us. For in a sense, we are like that blind girl, we trace our fingers all around Jesus, but we cannot see or understand it fully in this life. But like that blind girl, we have seen enough, we have felt enough, we have understood enough to want to throw our arms around Jesus and hug Him and say as loudly as we can, "I love you", in return. We love him because he first loved us.

On the few occasions when I have had to take a prolonged period away from home on missionary trips, one of the best parts is returning home. The trips have always been filled with God-given experiences and insights that I wouldn't have missed for all the world, not to mention the wonderfully faithful Christians I have met. Many of whom have become close friends. But the best part is returning home because that is when, viewing them in the pick-up point at the airport, I see Sarah, Jasmine and Thomas running towards me with arms outstretched. There is no better feeling than when I sweep

them up in my arms and stand there in the embrace for those first few seconds.

In the same way, Jesus wants us to run into his arms so that he might assure us of his love. Jesus loves us so much that he is willing to die on a cross so that we might receive eternal life. From the cross Jesus embraces the entire world.

And from that cross, Jesus is asking each of us to run into his arms, where he will encircle us with his love. A love which was willing to sacrifice, willing to give, so that we might live.

God's special love has been seen in numerous different parables this morning, in a mustard seed, in yeast, in treasure, in a pearl, in a vast net, in a court of law with Jesus as our chief defence. Then in our last modern parable we saw that we cannot ever fully see the vastness of God's love for us, but we have seen enough to give our own words of love in response.

In the words of St Paul from his letter to the Roman's, 'in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Amen