

## CCSY: 11<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost; 27 July 2008

Gen 29:15-28; Ps 105:1-11; Rom 8:26-39; Matt 13:31-33, 44-52

*Is heaven a big place, or a small place?*

My eldest brother is a dentist, and he doesn't recommend the gnashing of teeth: bad for the molars, apparently! Imagine the dental bills in Hades! At least, says my brother, there'll be plenty of dentists there to do the work! I'm not much taken with the apocalyptic, or 'end time', imagery of Matthew in this thirteenth chapter of his gospel, I must say – at least, not at face value.

For Matthew and his first readers, their experience of tribulation, conflict, and persecution was a sure sign that history was moving towards its final era and goal, following the critical time of Jesus' ministry. At the heart of that ministry was the proclamation – in word and deed – of the kingdom of heaven: the still-awaited reign of God which had broken into present reality from God's future in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus' primary concern in Matthew's gospel, therefore, is to bring his disciples, and the crowds, to the point where they too can embrace the reality of the kingdom in the present, able to discern and accept the priceless gift of it: living 'as if' that future were now. For Matthew's Jesus, the gift of the kingdom cannot be separated from its ethical demand and response – that basic orientation to its distinctive values – and the apocalyptic images which are appended to several of the parables we've been hearing in recent weeks serve to reinforce the urgency and priority of a single-minded seeking of the kingdom for Matthew's community.

I once heard it argued<sup>1</sup> that most doctrinal differences boil down to whether one thinks heaven is a big place or a small place.

It's a very useful index when it comes to all those questions of who's 'in' and who's 'out', that seem to have preoccupied churches through the ages, Matthew's being no exception. In the parables of the mustard seed and the net, Jesus chooses figures for describing the kingdom of heaven that suggest spaciousness, roominess, in-gathering – images that recall the pluriformity and abundance of creation itself: the net collects an almost infinitely diverse array of the fish of the sea; the mustard seed grows imperceptibly, but irresistibly, into a refuge for the birds of the air.

St Paul, likewise, writing to an even younger church than Matthew's in Rome, shares a vision of the extraordinary reach of the love and call of God in Christ. There is no place into which the One who is fundamentally for us cannot reach; no obstacle to the creator's good purpose that cannot be overcome. And God's good purpose, and summons, is that the elect – that is, those who, by responding in faith to this call, are graciously grafted onto God's enduring promise to Israel – might participate fully in the way of human being revealed in Christ, literally as his 'icons'.

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<sup>1</sup>

By the Revd Dr Judith Maltby, New College, Oxford, whilst a Visiting Scholar at Trinity College.

For all of these capacious biblical images, there are those texts – including in today’s gospel – that could fuel fears that heaven is a small place after all, that might reflect or reinforce what I would call the ‘principle of scarcity’. Take the story of Rachel and Leah.

In this episode of the narrative we’ve been following in recent weeks, Jacob has journeyed the length of the promised land to find a wife in his ancestral home: his opportunity for marriage being thus constrained by the prejudice of his father, Isaac, and the scheming of his mother, Rebekah, who wants to distance him from Esau’s wrath, having conspired with Jacob to steal the elder son’s birth right and the blessing of his dying father. Like women deemed suitable for marrying, blessing, it seems, is scarce. Jacob’s uncle, Laban, turns out to have a shortage of workers, and he out-tricks the trickster Jacob into 14 years of service: double the bride-price offered for Rachel.

Jacob and Laban’s struggle for dominance and their contest for the scarce resources of labour and bloodline, which will help secure the clan’s future, forces the sisters, Rachel and Leah, into a similarly competitive relationship. Rachel must now share the husband who loves her, while Leah is pitted against her sister and her husband, forever the outsider.

One commentator<sup>2</sup> reflects that they are chained together like prisoners in their marriage to Jacob, neither allowed to be a whole person, introduced from the beginning as parts, each possessing something the other lacks: Rachel is beautiful, Leah has tender, responsive eyes; Leah looks, Rachel is looked at. Once married, as the story unfolds, they remain incomplete: Rachel is the lover, the one desired by her husband; Leah is the mother, fertile to fault.

Rachel is desperate for children, ‘Give me children or I shall die’, she will demand of Jacob. Leah has no scarcity of sons, which should secure her a place of honour in that culture, but what she craves is love: ‘Surely now my husband will love me’, she forlornly hopes after the birth of each new child. In a grim economy of exchange, Leah will even trade mandrakes with Rachel – a rare vegetable thought to aid fertility – for a night of Jacob’s attention.

So many of our grim economies of exchange are a function of the principle of scarcity: that basic human anxiety that there is not enough to go round – enough love, or blessing, or food, or security of bloodline, or room in heaven. The kingdom of heaven, as uncovered from its hiddenness in the parables and the ministry of Jesus, is not such an economy. It is an economy of gift, of grace, and of freely chosen response. This kingdom is precisely that polity, that way of ordering our life together, where there is enough to go round, and where all may find a place, because it issues from the very life of God: the polity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What might it mean for us to live as if heaven were a big place?

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<sup>2</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 78.

I can never hear the parable of the mustard seed without thinking of the ballad by Indigenous song-writers Paul Kelly and Kevin Carmody, 'From little things big things grow': a story about the principle of scarcity in this vast land. What might it mean for our nation, our churches, ourselves, to live now as if God's reign were the real-politic, and there is enough love, enough land, enough food, enough money, enough blessing, enough room in heaven...?

The vision statement of this Parish, reproduced on one side of the insert in your pew sheets today<sup>3</sup> – and I can say this because I had no part in its drafting – offers some very fine concrete examples. How can we best express and support this vision and mission, and what more might doing so demand of us, of me?

The Eucharist we are about to share also encourages us to live as if heaven were a big place. If it's true that from little things big things grow, imagine the vision and practise of human community that could germinate from these tiny sacramental seeds: a morsel of bread; a sip of wine. So might the pattern, the shape of this meal itself come to be for us an icon, an enacted parable, of the kingdom of heaven – the table at which we are trained as its scribes: learning to recognise and show forth its hidden value and transforming grace.

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<sup>3</sup>

And on the Parish website ([www.ccsy.org.au](http://www.ccsy.org.au)) on the 'Ministry' page.