

The parable of the net Matthew 13:47-51

This is the third talk on the Kingdom of God. We started with the mustard seed before I knew that I was going to do a series which is a shame because this is in the middle of this section of parables. In Matthew 13 we have Jesus preach 5 parables on the Kingdom of God and they work in order, like a story, we start with the planting of the seed, parable of the sower, then we see how the seeds grow, the parable of the weeds, then we see how they spread, mustard seed, we then get a glimpse of the personal interaction involved, pearl and treasure, and finally we end up here at Matthew 13:47-50 The parable of the net. Jesus has brought his teaching on the Kingdom to a dramatic end with the end of the world.

Before we have a look at this parable lets remind ourselves the reasons we are looking at the Kingdom . I feel it is important as Jesus says that he came to declare the Kingdom. We should have an understanding of what this means, a lot of his teaching was around the Kingdom. The Jewish audience of the time had to unlearn a lot of their expectations regarding the Kingdom but at least they had some sort of concept, I feel like I am hearing descriptions of something I have never seen and so am only ever a beginner with this, as Thomas Merton says

We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life

This is a correct place to be though and there is an element of child like faith in accepting we do not know it all. We can be tempted with the more we think we understand about the kingdom to try and take charge and operate in a 'strategic manner'. To plan how we would have the Kingdom grow ourselves, to build the church in our image rather than Jesus'. It can all come in very holy sounding packaging but it is based on second guessing God. To give an example, I like murder mysteries, but I can drive people up the wall as I second guess all the time, who did it, who was lying etc. We can try and become experts in the Kingdom, second guessing, and hence we risk missing God's story by writing our own with God playing a part.

What I am trying to say, as much to myself, is lets be careful. Some would claim to know exactly what the Kingdom is doing and where it is going, but only Jesus knows that. We may have prophetic glimpses but be wary of someone who tells you exactly 'how the Kingdom should be operating in the world'. The last experts of the Kingdom were the Pharisees and they missed the fulfilment of the law, Jesus, the Messiah, altogether. Let's be happy being beginners, God blesses beginners.

We are looking at the parable of the net today and I hope to go back and do the first two of this section before moving onto the longer parables of the Kingdom later on in Matthew. This parable is a little more difficult to explore than the last 2 as Jesus gives us an interpretation of the parable already. So what more is there to be learned? A lot. This is a parable that I did not come to with any previous misconceptions, in fact I have never heard this parable preached on. This may be because it can be seen as a heavy parable

and any parable that includes 'weeping and nashing of teeth' is not going to be one without a difficult theme. But we can't shy away from this parable and there is some good news in here too.

So we have this short parable Mt 13:47-50 we have the Kingdom of God is like a net. This would immediately connect with Jesus' audience, they lived on the shores of Galilee, at the time Jesus was in a boat preaching, and fishermen were a common part of everyday life. Like the other parables, Jesus chooses an analogy that is accessible and understandable for all. This whole scene of fishing and sorting out the fish was an everyday occurrence. I think that there is a key here, I should imagine that once the fishermen had heard Jesus use this parable to compare their everyday activity to the sorting of mankind to heaven or hell that they would be unable to do it again without that analogy ringing in their ears. So in some ways this parable is used to help us stay on guard everyday, to recognise the end, things of eternal significance in our everyday life. I would prompt you to consider a suitable alternative in your everyday routine to remind you of the lessons of this parable as this will have been one of Jesus' intentions.

We have an explanation Jesus gives us so we have a head start with this parable. The net is the Kingdom catching fish, us, and just as fishermen separate fish the angels will separate the wicked from the righteous and throw the wicked away into the fiery furnace. Now I don't know about you but my immediate reaction to this is 'how do I become righteous?' So let's look at that first. We could talk about faith vs. deeds and debate issues of judgement but let's cut to the chase. We are not righteous and we can not attain righteousness. Except through our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of him we can stand before the father as righteous. No other way. We can not earn it, it is a gift. So if you are saved, relax a bit, you are righteous, but don't relax too much. Keep running the race and pursue Jesus. If you are here and you don't know Jesus, he is the only way to be saved and you need to be.

Now we mentioned deeds and works. Let us not forget about James' teaching of faith and deeds. I often think of deeds as necessary to earn my righteousness but I get it the wrong way round. If you love Jesus you will serve him, as Jas talked about a while ago, you will be a slave to him. In doing that we will do as Matthew 25 tells us, clothe the poor, feed the hungry etc. These acts are not ways to earn our righteousness, they are outpourings of our righteousness. Now we could spend the whole time discussing the balance of faith and works but I want to get into this parable and what Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom below the surface.

Let's start to unpack this a bit more. We begin with 'The Kingdom of God is like a net'. Now there are 3 kinds of net Jesus could have referred to. There was an *amphiblestron* which was a throw net, quite small, and there was a *diktyon* which was the general word used for a net. But the word Jesus chooses to compare the Kingdom to is a *Sangene*. A *Sangene* was a drag net that would be attached to the shore on one end and to the boat on the other. The boat would drag the net around in an ark to cover the widest possible area. This would pull the net through the water and catch everything in it's path. The net would then be hauled out of the water to the shore for sorting. So this is a big net, one

that sweeps across the ocean. This is the first point I want to come to. God's Kingdom moves through the earth. It is an undercurrent that flows throughout history and throughout the world. The Kingdom, like the net, is there whether people like it or not, it is inescapable. God's Kingdom is ever present, it is ever moving. We can tap into it or we can ignore it but we can never remove it. Those who chose to persecute the Church would do well to understand that. It is unbreakable, unchangeable and sovereign. But it is also sweeping through everything in our lives, in us, our family and friends, our work, our homes, everything you see has the fabric of the Kingdom sweeping through it.

Some say that we have to establish the Kingdom. I believe this parable demonstrates the Kingdom is already established. It is the foundation of everything. The Kingdom will grow and prosper, Jesus doesn't need us but he chooses to use us.

God is in charge of his Kingdom and he will move it through out the Earth. Let's not forget that. We should obey rather than trying to move it ourselves, I say that with experience of trying to pull it in all sorts of directions. The Kingdom will not be established here like a Kingdom of the Earth, that was the Jewish disappointment with the Messiah, They expected a Kingdom like the ones they understood. It is a spiritual Kingdom. This is why this Earth will pass away and we will have a new one.

So the Kingdom spreads throughout the earth. It spreads to all people and all people can enter into it. Remember the parable of the treasure, three points that come from it is that the Kingdom it is there, point 2 is that we can find it, and point 3 is that we need to claim it, chose to accept it.

The Kingdom is ever present to those in the church as well as those out of it. People outside of the church can grasp something of the Kingdom. There have been some wonderful self sacrificing people who obviously have something of the Kingdom but do not or will not recognise it. We can recognise the Kingdom around us, all that is good comes from God. I have a friend who reminds me of this point. He is pursuing spirituality, Jesus and others, he has grasped something of the Kingdom BUT he is missing something. He has missed the narrow path, Jesus and Jesus alone.

So we have the Kingdom, the drag net, let down into the earth. God has been moving his Kingdom from the start of time through his chosen nation, Israel, and opened it up through Jesus to all who would enter. We go on to see that it catches all kinds of fish. Of all the Churches I have visited I feel that I have met 'all kinds of fish', of people. Why is it that when you go to a church no one is as normal as you? Or there's a book title I like 'everybody's normal until you get to know them'. So all kinds of people are caught into something of the Kingdom, it passes through everyone, no exceptions.

This shows us that we don't search the Kingdom out, it collides with us. We will only respond to God because he called to us first. We are caught up into the Kingdom. It finds us where we are. I like that the Kingdom is always moving, always sweeping throughout the earth. If we are caught in the Kingdom, whether aware or not, we are being moved by it and with it. We are being swept along. The Kingdom does not stay still and

consequently neither can we. There is a challenge here. We should be moving with the Kingdom, in sync with it, but if we are all doing that, then we should all be moving as one, in sync with one another, as the body of Christ. Jesus himself prayed that we would be one as he and the father are one. The Church should be one body moving together.

A.W.Tozer put it like this

"Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified. The body becomes stronger as its members become healthier. The whole church of God gains when the members that compose it begin to seek a better and a higher life."

If we all seek God and his Kingdom we will be moving as one, much more than if we stop and look around trying to match one another.

If we strip away some of the disputable matters then a lot of churches are moving as one, but there is still a lot of disharmony. We still have some ways to go. Abandon yourself to being swept along by the Kingdom and God will use you. We are all being drawn back to God, we can work with that movement or struggle against it but we will be drawn back to him with everything that surrounds us. David asked 'where can I flee from your presence' you can't at the end you will face God. You and me, every living thing everything on Earth will return to it's maker, and we are being drawn ever closer.

We have seen how the Kingdom sweeps and moves in this parable. But it collects all kinds of fish. The Greek actually refers to all kind of sea creatures. This is prophetic of Jesus opening up the Kingdom to the Gentiles. It is important though to recognise that this is not a new concept and actually Jesus is borrowing this parable from somewhere else.

Ezekiel 47:10 says

Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds like the fish of the great sea.

This will have certainly teased the Jewish audience as this is in reference to the great temple prophesied through Ezekiel. So Jesus is talking about the Kingdom and now he refers to the famous temple, they will really have been interested here. Ezekiel was a prophet who God revealed a prophetic glimpse of the temple to be built. That temple is

the Kingdom.

Jesus' audience have already missed the point of a Kingdom from this, firstly one without walls, secondly one that's open to all. Let's not do the same. The Kingdom is open to all just as much today, the church is to be open to all too. Let us not be exclusive of those we will welcome into the church or who we will love. It is left for the angels to separate the righteous from the wicked at the end of the age, not us. We are not called to weed the Kingdom. The weeds must grow with the wheat so as to not uproot the wheat before the pre-ordained time. The net in this parable is indiscriminatory, it picks up everything, therefore so should we be in our welcome to and sharing with others.

If we're honest, the Church can be shy of 'sinners' sometimes. It will welcome those who gossip or lose their tempers, 'little sins', but if we are truly honest we struggle to welcome those who commit the 'bigger sins', sexual sins etc. I am not belittling the need to demonstrate right and wrong and I am not suggesting that sin is condoned or approved of but that does not include judgement, that will wait. We are all sinners, lets not create some hierarchy of acceptable sin. Jesus didn't, he welcomed sinners and still does, of any kind. The Holy spirit will convict of sin. God's church and Kingdom is open to sinners. After all the self professed worst of these sinners wrote most of the new testament.

Sinners are the Churches business and it is up to us to help and care for them like a hospital for the wounded. Jesus set the example for this.

He has risked all to allow anyone into the Kingdom and we are not to turn anyone away. All are welcome, the good the bad and the ugly, the reputable and the disgraced, tax collectors, sinners all are welcome into the Kingdom. There is a school of thought about not only doing the right thing but being seen to do the right thing. I agree with that in concept I think but not when it comes to people. We can be tempted not to associate with some people because of what others may think of us. But, Jesus associated with the worst of the worst, if he is willing to risk his reputation then mine pales into insignificance, I don't care about it. Paul tells us we need to 'Be willing to associate with those of low position' .

Back to the parable. When the Net is full, the Kingdom is full, the Angels will pull it up onto the shore. We don't know when it will happen and we won't figure it out, God's timing is supreme. We must always be ready and there is a clock ticking on those who do not know the Gospel, there is a warning there for those of us who do. We need to be reaching out to those who do not know God. I'm telling myself this.

A poem that I found written by Leonard Ravenhill challenges me

*Could a mariner sit idle if he heard the drowning cry?
Could a doctor sit in comfort and just let his patient die?
Could a fireman sit idle, let men burn and give no hand?
Can you sit at ease in Zion with the world around you damned?*

That really challenges me because my evangelism is pretty non-existent, but with this constant reminder of this parable that gives us of the fate of those who do not enter the Kingdom I am challenged to action. We'll revisit this later.

The fishermen sit around and collect the good fish in baskets and throw the bad fish away. When separating the fish the fishermen will have separated according to the law in Deuteronomy. So the good and bad fish will be the clean and unclean. If we go back to Deuteronomy we see that the good fish, the clean fish, are those that 'swim in the sea with scales or fins'. They are determined clean and therefore edible by Kosher standards. This actually tells us a lot too.

Apparently fish with scales or fins are those that swim closer to the surface. Some rabbis speculate that the reason these are clean is that those fish nearer to the surface are those who breathe a percentage of oxygen. I love this. We find that those who are separated as being good, or pure, are those of us who breathe a different air. I like this as it suggests that those who are pure are those who live between two worlds, live in the sea but breathe the air, or live on the earth but are citizens of heaven. We are in the world but not of it. We have this dual citizenship.

I want to consider this for a bit, what does it look like to be a citizen of heaven here on earth. I hope that this is something we are learning from exploring these parables on the Kingdom. Jesus tells us 'by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'. Love is the biggy. Jesus also says that we are his friends if we do as he commands. We come back to our initial look at faith and works. Something that I find interesting is that in a lot of the Bible we are told to be something. We are to be holy, we are to be loving etc. We are also told to clothe ourselves, in Jesus, in righteousness etc. Job talks about putting on righteousness as clothing. Righteousness is not something achievable but because of Jesus we can wear it, we can demonstrate it to others in the way that we love them and treat them. I love the part where Jesus talks about pursuing the Kingdom of God first, he says 'seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness'. This comes just after the section where he is telling us not to worry about our food or our clothes as the lilies of the field are clothed how much more will he clothe us. I like to consider this to be talking not only about clothing but also about righteousness. Pursue God and he will clothe you in Righteousness. Isn't that beautiful, don't worry about your clothing as you will be clothed in righteousness.

There is something else here that we can draw from the parable of the pearl. Remember we looked at the pearl and we found that it says that the Kingdom is the pearl merchant and the pearls are us. Well did you know how a Pearl develops? Something gets into the mollusk shell, an irritant or parasite. The mollusk then encloses the irritant in layers of nacre or pearl. This is a demonstration of what happens to us. We sin, something enters this perfect creation and rather than expelling it our God chooses to cover it in something, to clothe it in something that not only deals with it but that makes the mollusk acceptable and beautiful to himself. We are clothed in righteousness.

However, be aware what we are asking for here. Our righteousness should be demonstrated by how we treat one another. One piece of scripture that regularly challenges me is the end of Matthew 25 where Jesus tells us that if we feed the hungry and thirsty, invite the stranger in, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoners we do it for Jesus. Here the righteous are separated by how they cared for others. I do believe that we are called to demonstrate the righteousness we are clothed in. Our dual citizenship should be apparent to others in how we love them. I am challenged by this as I do not do nearly enough to care for others, to reveal the glory of God invested within me to others. In this we not only demonstrate our righteousness but we awake people to the Kingdom around us.

Jesus gives us an interpretation of this parable and some of what we are looking at will have been apparent to his listeners at the time. However, this is a parable about the final judgement. We can learn some lessons about how the Kingdom moves and what it means to us now but we have to focus on Jesus' point of the parable. God will stop the world, Jesus will come back and the angels will separate the righteous from the wicked. Despite how hard some people try to deny it or ignore it we have to face the fact that Jesus talked about hell, about this place where there will be weeping and nashing of teeth, the fiery furnace.

It has become unfashionable to talk about hell, people perceive preaching hellfire and brimstone as almost a primitive option. I'm afraid that we have actually lost this concept of divine consequence. I can't remember the last time I heard an evangelistic message that warned of Hell. Yet this is a very real consequence for those not in Christ. People do struggle to marry the idea of hell with an all loving God. I do not intend to go into a deep theological conversation about that but something C.S. Lewis says gives me a fresh perspective on this

I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside

Or as a Chinese proverb puts it

Heaven has a road, but no one travels it, Hell has no gate but men will dig to get there

Jesus spoke of Hell a number of times. Now I am not saying we should go and preach hell and only hell, but we must not forget or ignore it. Robert Farrar Cappon has done a lot of work on the parables of judgement and he speaks of hell and judgement but he also speaks of the fact that Grace is available for all and presented to all. It is a choice. I like the way he puts it

All theologians who hold Scripture to be the Word of God must inevitably include in their work a tractate on hell. But I will not

because Jesus did not — locate hell outside the realm of grace. Grace is forever sovereign, even in Jesus' parables of judgment.

No one is ever kicked out at the end of those parables who wasn't included in at the beginning.

We have good news to spread, as this parable tells us, the Kingdom is open to all through grace. But there is a consequence for those who do not accept this gift. Ephesians says that we are God's possessions, we must encourage people to recognise the Kingdom around them and be born again into it. This gives me a sense of urgency about those I love who do not know Jesus. Do I do enough to make them aware of the severity of their decision? Charles Spurgeon says

*If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our bodies. If they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees.
Let no one go there unwarned and unprayed for.*

The emphasis of this parable is not what happens to the saved but what happens to the lost. I am sorry that this is not a happy subject but it is what Jesus taught in this parable. We are called to be fishers of men, we are told to make disciples of all nations. There is a lot in this parable but it leaves me with a heavy heart for evangelism. Remember that the disciples would have been reminded of this every time they separated their catch. Find something to remind yourself daily of the importance of the Kingdom and the need to see others saved.

I hear this ever so loud for my family and friends who may have something of the Kingdom but are not written in the book of life as they do not accept Jesus as Lord. If you don't know that Jesus died for you to take the punishment for your sins and you can be born again and saved. All can be saved, notice that judgement happens after the resurrection of all. Jesus conquered death for all, it is now a matter of who accepts that and who does not.

We need to pray, lots and share the Kingdom in our actions and in our words to others. We do not have to turn people as far as we sometimes think, the door is open and the Kingdom surrounds them, it is a case of opening their eyes to what is already staring them in the face. There is no middle ground here, Jesus does not allude to any other sections of people. You're in or you're out. But Anyone can be in if they chose to be. Hell is for those who ultimately reject forgiveness and righteousness.

I would finish with a couple of other challenges. Don't forget the Kingdom surrounds us. The Kingdom is like a subtle bulldozer. It is unobtrusive, we choose to accept it or not, it does not force itself upon us, but it will decimate your life and rebuild it. However, due to the fact that this is all choice we can forget the Kingdom and block it out. We can fall into a comfortable slumber and Satan loves this. The church can sleep through generations. It can find a nice comfy position and ignore the world around it. Jesus wants us to be ever aware of the world around us. We have a responsibility to others to share the gospel. Please don't rest in the comfort of knowing you are saved and ignoring the fate of those who are not. Don't ignore Jesus' call to serve others and share the gospel. Let's awake as a church and move.

This parable shows us that at the end of the age everything, people, animal, nature, everything will be swept to God, it has all come from God and it will all return to God in his Kingdom. Everything around us belongs to him and will return to him. That fills me with a joy that I know that however bad this world appears it is not abandoned by a loving God who will call it all back to him.

To close with a challenge, there is a Fransiscan Benediction that takes some courage to pray, let me leave it with you as I think it sums up a bit of the challenge presented by this parable.

*May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships
So that you may live deep within your heart*

*May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice freedom and peace*

*May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war
So that you may reach out your hand and comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor*

Chris Burnett