



LISTEN AND HEAR

In her interpretation of the parable of the baker woman KATHLEEN RUSHTON alerts us to the twists hidden in Matthew's parables 13:1-52.

Jesus is recorded as uttering the words: "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear" a number of times. Nine variants of his appeal to our sense of hearing are laced through Matthew 13 and include Jesus' response to the disciples' question: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Parables are an invitation to go beyond what seems, to ponder at length, to take further and to go deeper. An invitation. To whom?

Matthew says that Jesus sat beside the sea. Great crowds gathered. He

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got into a boat and from there he told the parable of the seeds and the soils to the crowds and the disciples (Mt 13:1-9). When he was alone with the disciples Jesus answered questions and explained the parable (Mt 13:10-23). Then, yet again, he "told the crowd all these things" in a series of parables beginning "the kingdom (*basileia*) of heaven is like" the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, and the yeast (Mt 13:24-43). The crowd leaves and Jesus returns to the house, explains the parable of the wheat and the weeds to the disciples before telling them three

more parables: the treasure in a field, a pearl, and a dragnet cast into the sea (Mt 13:44-52).

Basileia of the Heavens/Skies

Only in Matthew do we find the phrase, the *basileia* of the heavens, which expresses God's vision for the earth and the universe. This vision is imaged in the first-century language of the *basileia* or empire.

The word for heavens is plural and has layers of meaning. When used in the phrase "earth and heaven" it can mean the sky above. Because so often "heaven" is understood apart from earth, Elaine Wainwright uses the phrase "the *basileia* of the heavens/skies" (*Tui Motu* Issue 212, Feb 2017: 20-21; *TM* Issue 213, March 2017: 22-23). Such wording is inclusive of contemporary understandings of the universe of which the human community is a part.

Context of Hearing Parables

What is the immediate context of the seven parables of Matthew 13?

Matthew 11-12 tells of the failure of Jesus' mission. While the word was preached to all, a few came to believe in Jesus but the vast majority did not. Opportunity does not guarantee response. People are free to respond. The gospel has met and will meet a mixed response.

The parables about Jesus' ministry of proclaiming the *basileia* of the heavens in the here and now, draw on the everyday, earthy realities in which his listeners were immersed — a sower, seeds, soils, weeds, a farmer, a merchant, fishers, nets, a baker woman, yeast, bread, mustard seed and the hope of finding treasure or a pearl.

Jesus' parables are puzzling stories. Often they are not pleasant tales that reinforce the way things are. They can turn the world upside down. In these stories of earthy realities, there is usually an unexpected twist that invites us to imagine God and the *basileia* of the heavens in a radically different way. There are no neat answers. They are open-ended. They tease us into working out what the story means and what our response will be.

Puzzling Comparisons

Let's look at "The *basileia* of the heavens is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Jesus' hearers would have noticed several things that the modern ear won't detect. They would have been surprised that Jesus referred to yeast in a positive way. In other places in the Scriptures, yeast is used to refer to corruption and hypocrisy as when Jesus warns about the yeast of some Pharisees (Mt 16:6; 11-12). Luke speaks of the "leaven of Herod" (Lk 12:1). And instructions for the first Passover prescribe unleavened bread which became a sign of membership of God's holy people (Exodus 12:15-20). No grain offerings were to be made with leaven (Lev 2:11).

Greek writers, such as Plutarch, also refer to the leaven of corruption.

How, then, does Jesus invert these commonly held notions of holiness? What is the unexpected twist here? Has leaven now become the locus of the sacred for Jesus? Is the *basileia* of the heavens like dough, which has been tainted by a "corruptive yeast", as was the commonly held standard?

The story said the woman *hid* the yeast in the flour. "Mixed", used in translations, has the wrong connotation because the Greek means "hid" — the same word Jesus uses when thanking God "because you have hidden these things from the wise . . . revealed them to little ones" (Mt 11:25; 13:35, 44).

Something Hidden Becomes Great

The coming of the *basileia* of the heavens does not have spectacular, grand and public beginnings. A little can have a great effect, a transforming influence.

Three measures of flour is a huge amount — about 30 kilos — which would make a great many loaves of bread and feed about 100 people. What does this suggest about the abundance of God? Those who heard Jesus

speak and knew their biblical traditions would recall that Sarah (Gen 18:6), Gideon (Judges 6:19) and Hannah (1 Sam 1:24) also baked with three measures (also called an *ephah*). They did so in preparation to receive a heavenly visitor. So what is Jesus asking of us by evoking this connection?

The practice of using living cultures of yeast in bread-making has been part of the interdependent rhythms of human and other-than-human life from time immemorial. Live organisms are isolated and propagated. This organic, growing process functions in similar but different ways to single grains of wheat which fall into fungi-rich soil to be transformed into ears of wheat. These ears of wheat are then worked by human hands, milled into

the flour in which the woman hid the yeast. Live organisms working silently and unobtrusively, quietly, organically — a fantastic outcome.

Unexpected Twist

What is the unexpected twist? How are we teased into working out what the parable might mean? God's *basileia*, like yeast working in a hidden way, will pervade life. Life is not the same for those who encounter the *basileia* of the heavens. It is disruptive of and disturbing to the way things are. What does it mean for us gathered at the Eucharist and for living our faith in the world? ■

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