

Great Expectations. Matthew 13:24-43

Expectations – Theirs and ours

It's funny what stays with you.

I can still remember the foolish builder's line from Butterworth and Inkpen's version of the story of the wise and foolish builder

"I want it now. I want it quick. This place will do"

I want it now, I want it quick, could well describe the attitude of the disciples to the establishment of the Kingdom of heaven, of the reign of God – the time when, in their understanding, all idolaters would be driven from the land and Israel, God's people, would dwell, secure and prosperous in their own land, living according to the righteous and just commands of God, worshipping the true God alone

So they didn't just want it quick

They wanted it pure – all the ungodly driven out

No more conflict, no more of their lies in your face

They wanted it big and bold, so the idolaters would be humbled, unable to escape confessing the victory and reign of Israel's God

You could understand that.

They were a conquered people, paying taxes to the Romans and living under their laws.

Every day the risk of some new humiliation

And they knew the burden of injustice – corrupt rulers, the grind of poverty – with money going to foreigners and absentee landlords, the grief of disease and death

They wanted that promised kingdom of heaven, that promised reign of God

And they increasingly thought that they had in Jesus the one who could bring that time

That is what lay behind John and James' mother's request to Jesus

Matthew 20: ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons approached him with her sons. She knelt down to ask him for something. ²¹ "What do you want?" he asked her.

"Promise," she said to him, "that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and the other on your left, in your kingdom."

²² *Jesus answered, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?"*

"We are able," they said to him.

²³ *He told them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right and left is not mine to give; instead, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."*

²⁴ When the ten disciples heard this, they became indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. ²⁶ It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

She wasn't talking about some distant time, or some heavenly, spiritual kingdom

She was looking forward to the time very soon when Jesus would be in power, be sitting literally on the throne in Jerusalem, at the centre of government, and she wanted her sons to share in the power and glory.

And it wasn't just the disciples who wanted the kingdom now.

The crowd in John 6, when they saw the sign Jesus had done, feeding 5,000 with a few loaves, said

John 6:¹⁴ When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, "This truly is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

¹⁵ Therefore, when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

And they wanted to make sure they were on the right side of history, by bringing to power, to rule, one who as the Prophet to come would inevitably come, like Moses, to rule over God's people.

They wanted the Kingdom now, and they wanted it quick

And this expectation that the Kingdom should come quickly, come now – didn't end with Jesus' death and resurrection

Acts 1:⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?"

⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

Before Jesus' ascension this was the question on the disciples lips

Surely now.

They had deeply ingrained expectations of the reign of God

That time should come Now

A Pure reign, with the godless gone

Big, bold, visible

And I get the impression that what they expected is not so much different from what many believers want today

God's reign on earth big and bold and visible – and now

They are tired of the confusion of right and wrong, the frustration of the continuing power of the godless

They want visible influence in the world, are disappointed by our lack of cultural control

Where believers' voices are not heard and listened to

They want to the hassle of living alongside those who reject God finished, to have things only our way

To have in our hands the levers of power, to call the shots on what happens

Perhaps you think I've overstated the case

But I am picking that up more and more as Christian people talk of our loss of freedoms, the neglect of their rights, their frustrations with or suspicions of the direction of government

Perhaps you share in that frustration

Mixed in with a longing for things to be put right – a longing heightened by the seeming chaotic events of the past week – rising Covid numbers, earthquakes, riots on our streets

At the very least you can understand what the disciples were looking for

The kingdom now, the kingdom quick

Pure, big and bold

But in the three parables we heard in our reading Jesus speaks to and corrects the expectations of His first hearers, and He also speaks to our expectations both of the Kingdom and God's work in the world.

And He tells them the Kingdom is not going to be the way they expect and want

But, if they will trust Him, better

What to expect of the Kingdom of Heaven

A wait

You heard the stories, and all three have in common one thing.

A wait

A period of time passes between sowing and harvest, between planting the mustard seed and its reaching its wondrous maturity, between putting the leaven in the dough and it being all leavened, the dough rising.

Not now, not quick the Lord Jesus is saying.

There will be a time between the beginning of the kingdom and its greatness, a time for development

It works to God's timetable, not ours

Will be revealed God's way, not the way we choose

And the parable of the wheat and the weeds also tells them

Mixed vv. 24-30

*Matthew 13:*²⁴ *He presented another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while people were sleeping, his enemy came, sowed weeds among the wheat, and left. ²⁶ When the plants sprouted and produced grain, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ The landowner's servants came to him and said, 'Master, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Then where did the weeds come from?'*

²⁸ *"An enemy did this," he told them.*

"So, do you want us to go and pull them up?" the servants asked him.

²⁹ *"No," he said. 'When you pull up the weeds, you might also uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At harvest time I'll tell the reapers: Gather the weeds first and tie them in bundles to burn them, but collect the wheat in my barn.'*

That in the time up until the harvest good and evil will co-exist, live alongside each other, inseparable from each other.

There will never be a time when the world is not mixed, and while societies vary over history, don't expect a time in history when all you have is the righteous running things.

The devil will continue to be at work and until the end when the spread of the gospel will be unopposed.

Small beginnings vv. 31-32

*Matthew 13:*³¹ *He presented another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³² It's the smallest of all the seeds, but when grown, it's taller than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches."*

And the parable of the mustard seed then tells them and us that the beginning won't come with a bang. The point of the mustard seed is to stress the smallness of the beginning. It is a tiny seed, the smallest they were familiar with.

Invisible v. 33

*Matthew 13:*³³ *He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until all of it was leavened."*

And often its presence and influence will be invisible, like leaven in dough.

Not big, bold and visible

Not the immediate removal of evil

But insignificant, invisible, mixed

That would have struck them as pretty disappointing, deflating, if they had taken it on board – it may even strike us that way

But

But that is not all the parables teach

Take the parable of the wheat and the weeds, and its interpretation in vv, 36-43. It is for the sake of the wheat, the children of the kingdom, the followers of Jesus, that the weeds aren't removed, that the good and the wicked co-exist.

The scene would not have been unfamiliar to the first hearers

It happened often enough for the Romans to have a law forbidding people from sowing weeds in their neighbour's field

And the specific weed in question – darnel, which is related to rye grass – grew up initially looking like the wheat. The difference only became apparent when it started to set seed, when the 'ears' were developing.

The goal of sowing it was to render the crop commercially useless, for the grains of darnel are poisonous and where they are mixed in with wheat grains the crop is dangerous and profitless.

By the time you noticed its presence the roots of the darnel had intertwined with the wheat, so you couldn't pull out the weeds without uprooting the wheat.

If the wheat was going to come to maturity – you had to wait to separate the wheat from the weeds at the harvest

It is for the sake of the wheat, to allow the gospel seed to come to full maturity in the lives of all God's people, that the children of the kingdom coexist in the world with the children of the evil one. Children has the sense of 'those who belong to' – the children of the kingdom belong to the King, they are those who follow the Lord Jesus. The children of the evil one are those who belong to the evil one because they have been enslaved by believing the devil's lies.

It is for the sake of God's children, to give them the opportunity and context to come to fruitful maturity, that they co-exist with the wicked throughout the world.

And it is the world. The field is the world. This parable is not talking about having a mixed church.

It is saying that while in Matthew 10:5-7 the mission of the 12 was to be confined to Israel, the Kingdom will embrace the world.

Thinking Kingdom the disciples only had their minds on Israel and the here and now of overthrowing the Romans

But Jesus knew His mission went beyond Israel, that He would have disciples from all nations – that His mission, His sowing of the seed, embraced the world

Just as He knew it was a mission the devil will always oppose with his lies.

But Jesus assures His followers, where they might become frustrated and discouraged by that opposition, that constant co-existence with evil – where the gospel seems to make progress and then rapidly is opposed or undermined – and you see that throughout church history

A door opens to the gospel, and at great cost people become believers, and more and more believe, and the false teachers enter. That was what happened in Nepal, and is happening amongst the Iranians

Or the reformation happens, and is derailed by the peasants revolt and a contest for power amongst the lords of the Holy Roman Empire

A culture is revolutionised by embracing a Christian ethic about the sanctity of life, and then other values become dominant

The growth of the weeds can be discouraging but Jesus assures his followers that the devil will not succeed in making that mission profitless, for there will be a harvest, a time when the weeds are separated from the wheat,

When v. 41-43

*Matthew 13:*³⁶ *Then he left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."*

³⁷ *He replied, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world; and the good seed—these are the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ Therefore, just as the weeds are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom all who cause sin and those guilty of lawlessness. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Let anyone who has ears listen.*

None of the wheat will be lost

One day the Kingdom will be pure – v. 41 – but only by Jesus' action at the end of the age.

When it will be bigger and better than anything the disciples were imagining would happen if Jesus were to soon take power in Jerusalem

And the parable of the mustard seed tells us that while the beginning is small, there is an unbreakable connection between that small beginning and the unrivalled greatness of that kingdom.

*Matthew 13:*³¹ *He presented another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³² It's the smallest of all the seeds, but when grown, it's taller than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches."*

Jesus starts with a plant they know, that they sowed on the edges of their fields, what was known as the black mustard.

Its seeds were proverbially tiny, the smallest commonly known to them

It could grow up to two metres in height

But when Jesus says *and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches.*"

He is not teaching them botany, he is emphasising the unexpected greatness of what will come from those small beginnings, a kingdom far beyond expectations

The mention of the birds coming and nesting echoes the descriptions of great world empires found in the Old Testament – as in the description of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom in his dream

*Daniel 4*¹⁰ *In the visions of my mind as I was lying in bed, I saw this:*

*There was a tree in the middle of the earth,
and it was very tall.*

¹¹ *The tree grew large and strong;
its top reached to the sky,
and it was visible to the ends of the earth.*

¹² *Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit was abundant,
and on it was food for all.*

*Wild animals found shelter under it,
the birds of the sky lived in its branches,
and every creature was fed from it.*

*Cf. Ezekiel 17.*²²⁻²⁴

There the birds and animals are other peoples and kingdoms finding shelter in his rule

From this tiny beginning will come a kingdom in which all nations can find a place

Jesus is assuring them that His ministry, His bringing the Kingdom in His preaching and presence, even though it is so small and insignificant, will inevitably, organically bring a great kingdom

As the tree is in the seed, so this Kingdom, greater than all, embracing all nations, is in His ministry.

And the leaven

Again, an everyday activity, one they would all have been familiar with

Leaven is like sourdough. The woman takes a piece of old fermented dough reserved from her previous bread making and puts into the new dough so that it ferments and rises

It is a very large amount of dough – estimated about 24.5 kg, enough to feed about 100 people.

Yet that small amount of leaven will have an effect on the whole lot, and it will permeate this large amount of dough unseen.

And again, that effect is inevitable.

Once begun, it will continue until it has permeated the whole, had a pervasive influence

The Kingdom Jesus is bringing may not have met their expectations at the beginning
 But what He has begun will inevitably exceed their expectations
 A kingdom whose work the evil one cannot make useless by His lies
 An eternal kingdom with no evil with people from every nation,
 A reign that will embrace all, greater than all empires and kingdoms
 An influence that will extend to all, unseen, nothing left untouched

Expectations and Experience

Theirs

You wonder what they would have made of these stories, of this kingdom
 It is so different from their expectations
 At first Puzzling, disappointing
 And they only had Jesus' word for it
 A puzzle and disappointment like Jesus' refusal to be a conquering king
 A puzzle and disappointment like Jesus' insistence He must suffer
 A puzzle and disappointment like his refusal when arrested to take up arms to defend Himself
 A puzzle and disappointment like His execution on that shameful cross, as far as you can imagine
 from a big, bold, triumph over the godless.

And then He rose, and He sent them out into the world [Matt. 28:18-20]

A world where they were insignificant, without power and influence

A world where the word they sowed was quickly met with opposition, lies, the presence of false teachers

And in that world as they went about Jesus' mission, Jesus' parable became a source of great hope,

Convinced of the resurrection they knew that this was the King's description of His kingdom

The King who had all authority in heaven and earth

And they knew the Kingdom was this way by His choice

This was the way He willed it to be

As He said, He could have called down twelve legions of angels to destroy His enemies [Matt. 26:52-53]

He could have seized power in Jerusalem any time

But He willed the children of the kingdom to co exist throughout the world to the end of the world with the children of the evil one

He willed the humblest of beginnings

He willed it to progress secretly, without fanfare

And so they would minister with persevering and confident hope

For they knew He willed and had guaranteed in Himself – the outcome

They could go confidently to the world – knowing no matter what the opposition God would bring the sons of the Kingdom, those who belonged to Jesus from every nation, to share in His eternal reign, and that in His patience none of His people would perish

They knew that in the insignificance of their preaching, their proclamation that the crucified Jesus was Lord – that the smallest of all seeds would grow to become the greatest of kingdoms

They knew that Their invisibility – where it was the poor, the lowly, the slaves, the widows, the poor in spirit, not the proud and wealthy and mighty, who were responding to the gospel - would change the whole world

Just as they knew the end was certain

Ours

But we hear these stories in a different circumstance

We know as we hear them what they came to know only later, that the one who speaks them is the risen King, describing His reign

And We have Christian history

We are in a church of Jesus' followers 2,000 years later at the ends of the world

So We have already seen their truth

Know continuing co-existence of Jesus' followers of those who still believe the devil's lies – and know the gospel seed is still growing up however dense we might feel the weeds around us

And we have seen great outcomes from the small beginnings of Jesus' ministry - We know that those who confess Jesus come from all nations and number in their billions

And We have seen the influence of the gospel in the world as people turn to Jesus, are persuaded of the rightness of His teaching – the founding of hospitals, laws that enshrine the dignity of the individual, the removal of slavery, the promotion of mutual faithfulness in marriage – and that no nation can in the end isolate itself from the spread of the gospel

We Know Jesus spoke the truth

And yet

Our experience

Is still mixed, and that can be wearing and discouraging, to see where we sow the gospel quickly the devil jumps in with his lies

And Christian presence can still seem so small

Overlooked and invisible, as well as ignored and opposed

Discouraging where we want to be noticed, want to be heard, think we should be heard

And we fear that the story is now happening in reverse

Influence receding, the tree being lopped, the weeds growing healthily and the wheat squeezed out

The encouragement of great expectations

But Jesus speaks the truth

He is, once and for all time, the King, never to be dethroned

King by His humbling Himself, by that puzzling, disappointing, determination to die

To die for our sins

That determination to not fulfill the expectations of His followers for the big, the bold, the violent destruction of His enemies

He gives us true and right expectations of His reign

We should be confident

The influence of the gospel won't, can't, be curtailed. Once started, it will work through the whole lump

The growth of the Kingdom is inevitable, and all nations will find their place in it.

The seed the Son of Man sows will bear fruit, His harvest won't be frustrated by the work of the evil one

He does it His way – always His way

So now is the time to keep living His way

Not being anxious but trusting Him

Obedying all that He has taught

Love of our enemies

Meekness

Being willing to suffer for righteousness

Rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's

Titus 3:1-2

Proclaiming Him the King

Remembering the end is certain.

It is the end that Jesus' explanation of the wheat and the weeds emphasises

Matthew 13: ³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

³⁷ He replied, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world; and the good seed—these are the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ Therefore, just as the weeds are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom all who cause sin and those guilty of lawlessness. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Let anyone who has ears listen.

We should take it to heart in these days – where we experience pestilence, earthquake, wars and rumours of wars

These are reminders that this world is under judgment

Which Should sharpen our readiness for the final judgment

Where our Lord teaches that there will be a separation between those who believe lies and do not submit to being ruled by His just commands – those who cause sin and are guilty of lawlessness

And the sons of the kingdom, those who belong to the King, by trusting Him and living as His disciples, doing all He has commanded

The difference in outcomes is as great as you can possibly imagine

The lawless consigned to the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth

That is Jesus' language – and it speaks of an end which is awful, just and conscious

He speaks the truth, speaks to warn

So that you can avoid that

IF rebelling

Don't comfort yourself by thinking Jesus doesn't know what He is talking about

Or it won't be as bad as He says – it will be worse than you can imagine

Rather believe Him as He warns

Just as you should believe Him when He says He came into the world to save sinners

Died to ransom you from this certain judgment

Call out to Him

Confess Him the living Lord and ask for mercy

You can do that at home

But the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom.

Will you be included amongst them?

Ready for the great harvest

By trusting Jesus

By living as children of the Kingdom, who know they belong to Jesus and give themselves to the righteousness he has taught in this gospel, the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the pharisees

Who persevere in listening to Jesus and doing what He says

Who are determined to be ready, and not just to be ready themselves but are determined to help others be ready

By preaching the gospel

That is love

And if we believe Jesus that is what these parables encourage us to do in our time, no matter when the end will come

The devil won't make the sowing of the word profitless.

No matter how you feel about society or how insignificant and overlooked you feel the Christian faith to be – the growth of the kingdom is all one way

It will grow to include people of all nations

It will, unseen, unannounced, work through the whole lump

This is the will of the King, our Lord Jesus, who reigns with all authority