

Year A, Proper 12
Matthew 13:31-33; 44-53
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
July 27, 2008
The Rev. John Spicer

Christ's Measure of Success

Well, it's good to be home. As many of you know, we got back about 10 days ago from our vacation in Great Britain. It was a time of incredible blessing for us: We had a fantastic trip, Ann felt well throughout, and nearly everything worked as we hoped – even better than we'd hoped. Thank you so much for your prayers supporting us while we were gone.

Our first Sunday in England, we took the train from London to Canterbury, home of the mother church of the Anglican Communion and the place where Anglican bishops from around the world are now meeting for the Lambeth Conference. We took an early train, hoping that we could get a decent seat in that great nave and actually see the pulpit and the altar. Once we arrived in Canterbury, we walked through the ancient streets, where so many other pilgrims have walked – only now, as you make your way toward the cathedral, you see not crowds of pilgrims but crowds of folks at coffee shops, including the omnipresent Starbucks, reading the paper and chatting on a Sunday morning.

We came to the gate that leads to the cathedral close and finally to the church itself. At my first glance inside, I was pleased to see open seats at the back of the nave. But as we came into the church, I was very surprised at what I saw – that *all* the seats in the nave were empty.

We looked up to the entrance to the part of the church called quire (what we call the chancel), and we saw something very familiar – ushers holding service leaflets. Apparently, the liturgy was being held in the quire rather than the nave. This was lovely for us, because it put us so close to those incredible voices of the men-and-boys' choir. But it was rather surprising to me that the main Sunday liturgy at the mother church of the Anglican Communion was held in a space that seated about 200 people at most.

It shouldn't have surprised me, of course. We face the same reality, and the same challenge to the Church, right here – right now, in fact, this very morning. It's not just in Canterbury that more people are worshipping at Starbucks on Sundays than are worshipping here in God's house.

How much should this worry us? Well, if people are at Starbucks, or on the golf course, or at home, then they aren't here, supporting the Church. People who don't come to worship tend not to be very engaged in the Church. People who aren't very engaged tend not to give very generously or sacrificially. Oh, and by the way – if people aren't engaged in the Church, it's impossible for the Church to carry out Christ's mission in the world. This secularization would seem to be a real worry for us, both in terms of the Church's ability to do Christ's work and in terms of the Church's own survival.

And yet, I wonder. Yes, God's rule and reign is being challenged by this trend of secularization. But what do we hear from Jesus in today's Gospel reading about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, and its presence in the world around us? Jesus' words are not exactly a call to worry.

Jesus says God's kingdom is like a mustard seed. It's tiny, and it seems insignificant – yet it bears the potential of growing millions of times beyond its present size, into a tree that shelters the inhabitants of God's creation.

Jesus says God's kingdom is like yeast that someone mixes with “three measures” of flour, which is about 50 pounds, enough for more than a hundred loaves of bread.¹ Like the mustard seed, the yeast also is tiny and seems insignificant – yet it bears the potential of changing everything around it, causing the dough to rise and expand and feed hundreds of people.

Jesus says God's kingdom is like coming across treasure hidden in a field or finding a pearl of the greatest value. It's the supreme treasure, better than anything we'd hope to find, worth selling everything we have in order to gain.

Jesus says God's kingdom is like a net thrown into the sea, catching fish of every kind. The fish aren't given an option once the net hits the water; it draws us into God's realm no matter where we thought we were swimming on our own. And at the end, at the time of judgment that we don't like to think about, the criteria of the kingdom will be the ruler that God will use to measure us fish and see whether we've matured enough to merit being put in the basket or whether we're still so small and self-focused that we get tossed someplace else instead.

Whatever else Jesus may have in mind with these provocative images of God's rule and authority, I think he does *not* want us to be anxious about the viability of the kingdom in the face of the world's challenges. What I hear instead in these parables is a call to something we present-day Christians aren't very good at, and that's patient effort.

God has been content to let us stumble along for 2,000 years as we disciples have spread the Good News of the kingdom and tried to figure out how to live into it. We began as a persecuted minority, seemingly with no hope of changing a world dominated by the power of Rome. When the Emperor Constantine came to power and Christianity became the religion of the state, it seemed that the kingdom *had* come. Eventually the Church became bound up with the state. In England as elsewhere, citizens were Christians by definition; and the sovereign's rule was symbolized by the orb, the image of the globe crowned by the Cross and cradled in the sovereign's hand. Even in our own country, *without* state support, the Church became a powerful institution; and the movers and shakers in the culture also were affiliated with powerful congregations in their communities – places like St. Andrew's.

But that kind of Christendom didn't bear much resemblance to the reign of God that Jesus describes in today's parables. For Jesus, the reign of God appears small now but has the potential for life-giving greatness. For Jesus, the reign of God changes everything around it. For

Jesus, the reign of God is worth giving up everything we have simply to find it. For Jesus, the reign of God is the basis of our judgment.

I think we're much more comfortable with God's kingdom being embodied by churches that bear the marks of worldly success – full pews every Sunday and plenty of money in the bank. Don't get me wrong: Full pews are great, and we all rest easier with plenty of money in the bank. But Jesus would have us striving for a different measure of kingdom success.

And on our trip to Britain, I saw a number of examples of just that kind of faithful, patient effort going on. The naves of the cathedrals may not have been as full as the parks and coffee shops on Sunday mornings, but that wasn't stopping them from kingdom work like this:

In Canterbury, after the liturgy, we were welcomed like lost friends and nearly dragged to their version of coffee hour – which featured red and white wine rather than bad coffee, a little in-breaking of the kingdom all its own.

In several cathedrals we visited, the audio guides we rented to learn the history of the building also included strong theological explanations of baptism and Eucharist, and why they matter to Christians. This was tremendous evangelism, telling about the faith to people who clearly have at least some interest in finding out more.

At St. Paul's in London and in Salisbury, the tourists were invited to stop and join in a prayer over the loudspeakers every hour, reminding everyone that these were fundamentally places of worship and ministry, not holy museums.

In Chester, when you come into the cathedral, you're greeted by a large display describing the congregation's involvement with a group called the Melanesian Brotherhood in the Solomon Islands. It's an evangelistic mission sending Christians to go and live among people in that distant place, practicing prayer and witness and service.²

In Exeter, on the cathedral's list of services, you find something called "Nightchurch," a service late on Friday nights that seeks to draw in young people who've found traditional church to be a barrier rather than a bridge to God.³ Also in Exeter, an old parish church on the cathedral close, St. Petrock's, has been turned into an agency serving homeless people.⁴

And in Bath, at Bath Abbey, when tourists come into the church, they get a brochure that doesn't just tell the story of a grand building. In *this* brochure, the first couple of pages tell the Christian story instead. First, it describes Jesus' humble beginnings, his lack of an organized movement, and his isolated setting. Then, it says, in part, "Today, nearly 2 billion people throughout the world worship Jesus as divine – the Son of God. Their experience has convinced them that in the wonders of nature, we see God as our loving Father; in the person of Jesus, we discover God as Son; and in our daily lives we encounter the same God as Spirit. Jesus is our way of finding God.... He taught that we are all infinitely precious, children of one heavenly Father.... [This] message of the Good News about Jesus is the reason this Abbey exists."⁵

What I see in these English churches is something like what I think Jesus had in mind in his parables of God's reign. The kingdom of God isn't about looking successful in the world's

eyes; it's about being part of a different reality that may not look terribly impressive at all in the world's eyes. And this matters for us because *that* reality, the reality of the kingdom, is the one by which we will be judged. We find both our salvation and our judgment in this realm that stands in contrast to the world we're so tempted to inhabit.

So I needn't have worried so much that Canterbury Cathedral wasn't full the week we visited. I'm sure the folks there would have been happy, even relieved, if that *had* been the case – just as we feel so much better when our pews are full and our budget is big. But ultimately, our faithfulness to Christ's kingdom is the sole measure of our salvation – and that's ultimately the sole measure of our success.

1. Note on Matthew 13:33. *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993, 1882.
2. For more information, visit www.chester.anglican.org/melanesia.
3. For more information, visit www.exeter.anglican.org/mission/cmu-mininews-nightchurch.php.
4. For more information, visit <http://www.stpetrocks.org.uk>.
5. "Welcome to Bath Abbey," a flyer given to all visitors. To view the flyer, click here. For more information, visit www.bathabbey.org.