

I haven't taken the time to count how many illustrations Jesus uses in the Gospels to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, but there are many. Today's Gospel reading is that section of Matthew 13 when there's a whole list of little stories – similes of description – that try to capture a concept too big to ever capture. But each new story about the Kingdom of Heaven puts a new pixel or two into the big picture – a new facet on the infinite gem – for us blind little mice, a different perspective of the giant elephant.

Some of the stories seem pretty straightforward and descriptive – like the Kingdom of Heaven being like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field, and although it is the tiniest of all seeds, when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. Or the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. These stories both seem to show how the kingdom of Heaven, like the loaves and fishes, somehow infinitely and miraculously multiplies. The Kingdom of Heaven grows and transforms, and also transforms the world by creating new shelter and sustenance – and this occurs even if you start with only the tiniest grain of it.

On the other hand, some of these little stories could keep you busy pondering for a long time – like the Kingdom of Heaven being like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Think about that. If you found a treasure, would you go hide it in a field and then sell everything else you had so you could buy the field? Why wouldn't you just bring the treasure you found home and add it to what you already have? Perhaps this story is suggesting that the Kingdom of Heaven produces such complete and utter joy that you're willing to give up everything you have to possess it. Perhaps it also suggests that the Kingdom of Heaven is somehow grounded in a very specific place and time.

And then there's that merchant who has spent his life searching for fine pearls. Just like any collector, he must have always kept his eye out for that perfect specimen – that ultimate pearl. But when this collector found that pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. I don't know how many serious coin collectors or antique collectors or any kind of collector would go and sell their entire collection to be left with only one valuable thing. If you sold every one of your baseball cards to buy just one perfect Mickey Mantle, could you still call yourself a card collector? Or would you have been changed into something else? This story seems to suggest something about the supreme value of the Kingdom of Heaven – it's so valuable, it's worth giving up everything for – worth changing your whole life and identity for.

Then there is the Kingdom of Heaven being like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. You might think that the Kingdom of Heaven would be compared to the bounty of good fish culled out at the end, but instead, it's compared to the net that catches everything – the good, edible fish and also the inedible fish, old boots and soggy logs. Maybe, this story suggests, the Kingdom of Heaven is not neat, orderly and consistently good but messy, chaotic and diverse, inclusive of all experiences – both what we would call good ones and what we would consider bad ones. This both/and quality is reflected in Jesus' last story when he says that anyone trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. This seems to indicate that the Kingdom of Heaven is not just in the old and revered traditions, but also in fresh, new ideas – but also not just in the shiniest new innovations, either, but equally found in the wisdom of the past – a very balanced both/and position that is always good food for thought for Anglicans, and certainly important instruction for our youth and innovation obsessed culture here in 21st century America.

Well, so now that these little stories have completely enlightened us on the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven... Of course we can never describe the indescribable – or grasp that which will always be out of our reach. If anything, Jesus' many little puzzling stories about the tremendous and breathtaking concept of the Kingdom of Heaven serve to remind us, perhaps better than anything else in the Bible, that we are all just beginners – little children in the

realm of God. But yet these stories do give us glimpses – moments – little sparks of recognition of something that we feel in our bones is terribly important despite it being so intangible and impossible for us to really grasp.

In the closing paragraphs of Romans 8, what has to be one of the most comforting passages in the Bible, Paul writes that the Spirit helps us in our human limitations weakness. We don't understand this awesome God, the Kingdom of Heaven to which we've been called and invited, or how we are to properly react to them. No matter how much we want to please God, we just "do not know how to pray as we ought," Paul says, but yet, "the Spirit of God intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God."

God is working in us despite our inability to understand. You must know what it's like to have a feeling that is so overpoweringly strong you just don't have the words to describe it? Those moments when all you can do is scream, or giggle, or sob or just take a deep, deep sigh. It is perhaps then, Paul is suggesting, in those moments that are beyond words, that we enter the realm of the Spirit, who through us is praying in sighs too deep for words. And even though we struggle to know what to say or do or be, the Spirit is interceding for us – opening our hearts to God for us – translating our tangled feelings to God for us – making our lives into a prayer to God.

How comforting to know that God is able not only to understand us but to use us, despite our bumbling ways. As Paul says, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? So who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Knowing that and trusting that – that must be what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.