

'Have you understood all this?'

David Wilbourne's sermon for Trinity 10

'Have you understood all this?'

Jesus asked his disciples.

They answered,

'Yes!'

Well, they would wouldn't they?

They wouldn't dare to say

to the son of God,

God's ultimate Word,

'Come again?'

I didn't quite get that bit about

the mustard

or the yeast,

or the buried treasure,

or the priceless pearl,

or the net...

run it past me again, Jesus,

and take a bit more care explaining things this time.'

You don't speak like that to the Son of God.

So they said

'Yes'

and nodded

and attempted to look wise,

as you do when you haven't got a clue.

What about you,

did you understand all that?

Probably if you are honest,

you'd say yes and no.

Which is fine.

I guess what is going on here

is that Jesus is bombarding you with images

to run with,

to fuel your faith and your imagination.

The marvellous poet TS Eliot

plays the same trick,

juxtaposes contrasting ideas and pictures

to fast forward you,

to compress a whole lifetime,

a whole salvation-time.

To quote his Journey of the Magi,

‘Then we came to a tavern with vine leaves over the lintel,

Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,

and feet kicking the empty wine skins,’

‘Have you understood all this?’

‘Yeh, sure TS, I understand every word.

I just love those six hands and that open door.’

A few clues to help you run with all those contrasting

pictures

in this morning’s Gospel.

Don’t get caught up questioning the process.

Stay with the snapshots,

then and now.

Then: the tiniest of seeds,

literally a mustard conker in the Greek.

Now: a huge shrub,

ten feet high,

dwarfing everything else

which grew around the shores of Galilee.

Then: just a sprinkling of yeast.

Now: pounds and pounds of flat dough

risen a treat.

The moral:

from just the tiniest and unpromising of starts

the kingdom of heaven

can achieve results which are mind-blowing.

As with kingdom people,

like the shepherd boy David,

right through to the virgin Mary,

tiny, insignificant, little people,

written off by the world,

written in, big-time, by God.

Don't feel insignificant,

don't feel so microscopic:

you're an ally with the mustard seed,

with the spec of yeast,

with David

with Mary.

And in Jesus' day the seed was a powerful image of

resurrection,

life from death.

Then: the dead seed was put in the dead earth.

Now: just look at the harvest.

We get caught up with worrying about the process,

the seed germinating and growing etc.

But just stay with the snapshots -

then: death

now: life.

Similarly with

the buried treasure and the pearl in a million

and the men who giving up everything to achieve them.

The point isn't about the process,
isn't spurring Jesus' followers on
to heroic self-sacrifice:
you've got to let everything go too.
The point is not about the loss,
but the greatest joy
as those two men achieve their goal.
Seek God's kingdom and it will bring you utter joy.
Now there's something the C of E hides terribly well.

And finally the net.
Trawl a wide sea,
the image urges.
Don't be too choosy,
in fact don't be choosy at all,
about which fish are allowed in

and which are barred.

Leave God and his angels to sort it out on judgement day.

You just fish

with the biggest of nets.

On holiday I read a novel by Melvyn Bragg,
inevitably set in a grey Cumbrian town
in the grey 1950s.

A young lad is really, really keen

to become a server

at his parish church,

but the Vicar summons him

to a meagre tea in his grey Cumbrian vicarage

and tells him he is not good enough.

I think of the tea we had recently with our servers and
confirmation candidates

and they chatted on happily
un-self-consciously in my presence,
about which of their teachers was having an affair with
whom.
They exuded being included rather than excluded.
However marvellous we might imagine
the Church of yesteryear was,
thank God these days we're more inclusive than exclusive,
that we're not so obsessed with definition,
who is in, who is out,
what is proper,
what is not allowed.
Three jobs before he became archbishop of York,
David Hope
became Vicar of All Saints Margaret Street in London,
an ultra-high church

which would make our church seem like a Calvinist ghetto.
On his first Sunday
he was standing at the altar
heartily singing the offertory hymn,
when the head server sidled up to him.
'In this church, Father, we do not sing in the sanctuary.'
'It's my sanctuary and it's my church.
If I want to sing, I'll bloody well sing,'
David Hope is supposed to have replied.
I've often thought of that during my eleven years in
Helmsley
when people have told me about what I cannot do.
'Trawl a wide sea,
don't judge who's in, who's out,
what is allowed,
what is not allowed.

Leave God to do the deciding,
you fishers of men and of women,
just get on fishing.'

'Have you understood all this?'

Jesus asked his disciples.

They answered,

'Yes!'

But then you look at the antics of the Church through the

ages,

the lack of nerve,

the lack of joy,

the lack of generosity,

the pogroms,

the exclusions

and you think,

No,

they didn't understand.

All those parables fell on deaf ears.

Which is always possible with parables -

as it is with sermons.