

## Reflection on Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

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*Have you understood all this?* Jesus asks the disciples at the end of a string of parables about the kingdom of heaven.

This is not merely a question of cognitive functioning, as in, “Do you get it?” Given the strange twists and turns of parables, even a purely cognitive grasp might be a stretch! I mean, why did the person uncover treasure and bury it again? It doesn't make *sense*. But of course, parables work on another level entirely that requires not cognition but *faith and imagination* for deep wisdom and insight to be gleaned.

The Greek word translated as “understood” is made up of two parts meaning “together with” and “put” so, literally, “put together with.” The sense of the word means to weave together parts into a meaningful whole and, in its New Testament usage, when the pieces come together, they reveal the thread of God's wisdom and presence in our lives.

Some might call this weaving the work of integration. It is most often a second half of life activity that involves things like remembering, bringing closure and letting go, offering forgiveness to others and ourselves, discerning, prioritising, and allowing a tapestry of life to emerge that is generous, harmonious, freeing and selfless in love.



Ironically, it is precisely in their absurdity, in the ways they challenge conventional thinking and expectations, where the real power of the parable lies. For the self-giving love of God revealed by Jesus invites us beyond considerations that are merely about what is practical, convenient and logical.

Think of waking up in the middle of the night to care for an infant. Or spending regular time with an aging loved one who might not remember our name. Think of how we support unconditionally our young adult children through their testing and trials. Or how we choose to forgive someone who refuses to see the hurt they cause. I think of my friend who quit her secure job at Lockheed Martin because she didn't want to add to the world's war machinery anymore. Or how despite our own limitations, we may be generous to others—like the guest of our Emergency Relief program who brought \$50 for the offering box this week. These things don't make sense, they don't add up, but somehow they matter and are where the kingdom of heaven is glimpsed in this world.

Today's parables point out that when the Gospel comes together for us and we are awakened by God's love within it, the values and ways of being we start to take on may seem ridiculous or even unrealistic and impractical in the ordinary scheme of things.

This was certainly the case for me when I heard the government's announcement at the end of June that we intend to increase our military spending by \$270 billion dollars. I don't assume to know the ins-and-outs of politics. In fact, I don't wish to make a political statement here per se. Instead what is instructive to me and what I hope to share is my visceral reaction to the announcement itself.

In a press conference, PM Scott Morrison said, “The post-COVID world will be poorer, more dangerous and more disorderly.” This projection seemed to provide all the justification necessary to increase our military capacity. But given the Uniting Church's alternative response in the face of these realities and my participation in this response through our Emergency Relief services, I was sickened by our government's conclusion. We see the extreme end of what it looks like to respond to social concerns with force being played out in the US as protestors are silenced by federal officers with tear gas and sticks.

Surely there is another way, a more just, compassionate and wholistic response—even to the most complex situations in our lives and in the world. If indeed the post-COVID situation will be poorer, more dangerous and disorderly, *where does love call us to be?* I believe this is a question that can orient us at all times, but especially now as COVID has reset our lives and our communities.

As non-sensical, unrealistic and even risky as it may seem, the Gospel urges followers of Jesus to be like seeds and yeast, bringing about a gentle revolution with small acts done with great love. As I'm finding, often the greatest risk comes from the dismantling that happens *in our own hearts* of our separateness, our power, our certainty of perspective and our wish for certainty itself. When we truly invite the poor and disorderly to come near, there is the possibility—and, for the sake of transfiguration, the hope—that we will get in touch with our own impoverishment, chaos and limitations. From this place of humility, community and mutuality, visions of the commonwealth of God come into view.

As Sr Joan Chittister has said:

Only those who come to see the world as God sees the world, only those who see through the eyes of God, ever really see the glory of the world, ever really approach the peaceable kingdom, ever find peace in themselves.

To *understand* the teachings of Jesus, then, in an integrated and mature way, means that not only are the pieces of our life woven into a meaningful whole but the Gospel begins to impact and shape *the whole of our lives*—all the bits and pieces. No area of our living is left out of the light of God and, slowly over time, everything begins to reflect the divine love we encounter. In other words, we start to love as God has loved us and this, I think, is a treasure worth giving our all to realise.



God help us to change.  
To change ourselves  
and to change our world.  
To know the need for it.  
To deal with the pain of it.  
To feel the joy of it.  
To undertake the journey  
without understanding the destination.  
The art of gentle revolution.  
Amen.



—Michael Leunig