

Sometimes there are weeks when I look at the readings and wonder what on earth I can possibly make a sermon out of. Not this time! This week there is so much available that it's hard to decide what to choose. In fact I wondered whether to leave it all to you – ask each of you to pick the idea that most appealed to you and write your own sermon; something you'd really like to listen to. And all three readings are so familiar that if we're not careful we just glide through them without taking much notice, because we already know what they say. But if we read slowly and attentively, something will attract our attention; maybe something familiar but with a new slant, or something we've never really noticed before.

What registered particularly with me this time was Jesus's mention of scribes. This might be because I've been spending a lot of time thinking about scribes recently – they wrote all the medieval manuscripts I've been studying. When scribes appear in the New Testament they are usually paired with Pharisees, and Jesus is equally scathing about all of them. But they are not the same. The Pharisees were members of a strict Jewish sect which was particularly committed to meticulous observance of every provision of the Mosaic law, a religious and traditional requirement which took precedence over everything else. The scribes, on the other hand, had a very practical function. They too were experts in the law, but their role was, literally, to write it. They produced all the legal documents – contracts for marriages, loans, sales of land, statements of divorce, inheritance provisions and all the other business and family requirements, as well as writing letters and other formal statements. These men had had formal legal training and what they wrote had authority. Every village would have had its own scribe; towns and cities had many. Their interest in the law was professional and practical. People trusted them to get it right. Pharisees were involved with the religious law on a daily basis, but it wasn't how they earned their living. Most of them were small land-owners or traders – logically a scribe could also be a Pharisee and no doubt some were, but on the whole the groups were separate. It's not surprising that both of them challenged Jesus regularly, looking for occasions when he broke the law or – worse – encouraged others to do so.

In today's gospel Jesus talks about 'scribes...trained for the Kingdom of Heaven'. Instead of writing and interpreting the laws of the Jewish temple, these people would write the contracts and expound the laws of the new kingdom of God's people. They would explain to the people of their village how this new kingdom worked, and how things had to be done and people had to behave to stay in line with it and realise its benefits. To do this they would have to use examples and comparisons to make it easy for everyone to understand. They would use their store of knowledge, their treasure, to combine what was good and constructive in the 'old' world with what would be 'new' – the new covenant that Jesus had brought and the salvation now available to everyone, no matter who they were or where they came from. No longer would the law be just for the Jews. They would need new language; language of the sort that Jesus was already using. No Jewish scribe would ever have likened heaven to a tree or to hidden treasure; nor would they have suggested giving up all one's possessions in order to get there.

Jesus described the Kingdom of Heaven in terms his audience was familiar with. They knew about mustard seeds and yeast, and they understood why treasure had to be buried to keep it safe. These analogies won't quite work today. It's our duty as Christians to spread the gospel;

to talk to other people about our faith, why it is so important to us and how others can experience the love of God for themselves. But unless we use the normal language of today, we'll simply be written off as a bit odd. Eccentric, probably harmless, but definitely weird, and perhaps not the sort of person you'd want to spend an evening in the pub with. So how will we tell the story today? What is the Kingdom of Heaven like in 21st century Ealing?

I decided not to get you to write your own sermon. But I do think you should have a go at your own 'Kingdom of Heaven' parable. You'll have to think hard, but it's fun! My worker-priest friends do this quite often, because we have to make theological sense in the offices, shops, surgeries and schools in which we work. To inspire you, here are two we came up with recently.

The kingdom of heaven is like the person in Camden who started to visit and chat to a housebound neighbour, and then encouraged someone else to do the same. Now there is a befriending scheme across the borough which is a godsend to a friend who has MS.

The kingdom of heaven is like the manager who found that work had dried up and he and his team were likely to be made redundant. Instead of sitting around grumbling about how unfair it was, he pushed them to network with friends and colleagues, and to take the training courses they'd never quite had time for. He called in every favour and pulled every string he could reach to find roles they could apply for. When the HR manager came around three months later to check how many redundancy notices would be needed, she found that everyone already had another job – and most of them were better than the ones they'd had before.

If you look around, you'll see little pieces of kingdom work going on today. Even better than writing your own parable – start some kingdom-building yourself, or join something that's already under way. Ask for God's help, pray for it to grow and flourish, and remember 'Old and New': traditional values with twenty-first century interpretations.