

## Views from the Pews: The Kingdom of God, Part 2: Mystery and Paradox

In the Gospels, Jesus referred to the Kingdom of God (or heaven) no fewer than 83 times. Most these references are in the context of a point he was making that was only indirectly related to the Kingdom. For example, in Mat 19:24 he said, "I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." That teaching was about the potentially toxic effect of an obsession with wealth rather than about the Kingdom of God itself.

However, in Matthew 13 there is a well packaged group of Parables that do shed real light on Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom. The same chapter also includes his explanation of the reason he taught in stories (e.g., The Sower, The Weeds and the wheat, The mustard seed, the Yeast, the Treasure in a field, the Merchant and the pearl, and the Net thrown into the sea.) The Kingdom of God, it seems, has two characteristics that render direct explanations unsuitable.

Firstly, it is mysterious, beyond rational analysis. Like a train entering an underground station, already in the tunnel yet still arriving; it has arrived, yet it has still to get there. Further, the Kingdom is visible to those who have eyes to see it, yet obscured from those who do not. It is simultaneously moral and yet it is also subversive. Its reality is the unreality of paradox and the reversal of norms. It is ultimately mysterious, thus defies definitive explanations.

And if that is not difficult enough, the Kingdom of God is, at its centre, relational. Rather than calling people to subscribe to an ideology, set of propositions or a religious system, they are invited into a *relationship* with Jesus (with all the nuances and complexities that characterise relationships).

Thus, when it came to communicating the Kingdom of God, Jesus chose to use stories. Stories have two characteristics that make them ideal for the task. Firstly, we engage with stories with our whole person. Who among us has not been reading a novel and suddenly found themselves no longer reading words on a page, but transported mysteriously into the story as an observer or even a participant? Secondly, stories have a way of bypassing our automatic plausibility filter, thereby allowing us to be more open to truths related to mystery and paradox.

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