

DISCERNING YOUR VISION

AN EXERCISE FOR CHURCHES THAT ARE ON THE WAY

This is a rich and prayerful way of engaging in the call to discern a fruitful and sustainable future in your church or Deanery, using some of Jesus' parables of the kingdom. It is best done in a small group.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Jesus used the phrase 'the kingdom of God' or 'the kingdom of heaven'¹ a lot. In fact the word 'kingdom' appears 162 times in the New Testament. When Jesus uses it, 'the kingdom' usually means – **how things are when they're the way God wants them to be.**

There is a realm in which everything is exactly how God wants them to be – and we call that realm heaven. And Jesus came to enable that kingdom of heaven – how things are when they're the way God wants them to be – to come to earth as well. Hence the prayer we say so often – 'your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.' Which is a way of saying **'please Lord, can things on earth be the way you want them to be – as they are already in heaven.'**

Jesus often talked about the process of heaven coming to earth as something that is underway right now, and of the kingdom of heaven as something that we can discover around us. And to help us see where that's happening, and to invite us to join in, Jesus told short, pithy stories or parables about the kingdom. And they usually start with him saying – 'the kingdom of heaven is like' or 'what shall we say the kingdom of God is like?'

These stories are like pointers, descriptions or invitations to look for the kingdom here on earth. They're like the key to a map, as if Jesus is saying, 'this is how you'll know that the kingdom is here; this is how you'll know that things are the way God wants them to be.'

Bear that in mind as you do this prayerful and reflective exercise.

¹ In Matthew's gospel Jesus uses 'the Kingdom of heaven' and in Luke's gospel it tends to be 'the Kingdom of God'. For this exercise, these phrases can be used interchangeably.

HOW TO DO THE EXERCISE

Begin by **choosing someone** (or, even better, two or more people) to read the parables to the group.

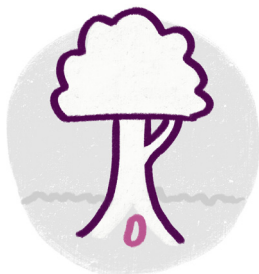
Next, take a moment to **pray** that the Holy Spirit would enable these parables to come alive, and to speak to the group directly and that, together, you might become clear where heaven is coming to earth in your parish, community or Deanery.

Then, **read** the parables aloud, slowly and prayerfully, pausing after each one to give time for silent thought and reflection.

As you listen to each parable, ask yourself this question – **‘What might this mean for my church (or Deanery)?’**

Once you have heard all of the parables, share your responses with each other, paying attention to the quality of your listening and always looking to discern the common thread in your reflections, so that you end up with a shared response to the question.

THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM



Jesus said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”



Jesus also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”



And Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”



And Jesus said, 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.



Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

A FURTHER QUESTIONS

Having shared your reflections with each other, spend some time with this further question:

'What are we called to do next with what we already have available?'

Just as we believe that these parables point us towards the kingdom of God that is with us now, so we also believe that we have everything we need to discover the kingdom that Jesus is speaking about. There is nothing Jesus has held back, failed to do or forgotten to tell us. You have everything you need in your community, church and in the world around you. There is nothing, nothing at all, that you lack as you seek the kingdom.

In that truth, acknowledging what you have just discerned about the kingdom in your church and community, ask yourself, **'What are we called to do next with what we already have available?'**

FINISHING UP



Make sure you **finish in prayer**, giving thanks for what has been shared and received, and asking for the Lord's blessing on whatever comes next with your discussions, dreams and plans.