Be careful what you pray for – you just might get it…

That may seem like a strange thing to say but there is truth in it. Sometimes as Christians, the prayers just roll off our tongue and we don’t really think through the implications of what we are praying for or the process that may be involved if the things we pray for come to pass.

Nowhere is that more evident, I think, than in the Lord’s Prayer which we say week in week out, perhaps some of you say it day in day out - and perhaps we don’t really think through the implications of the words we are saying.

The Lord’s Prayer is an incredibly powerful prayer with some dangerous and subversive statements in it and not least of these is the phrase, “Your Kingdom come…”

What seems like a fairly pleasant and generalised plea to God is actually a subversive, counter-cultural, revolutionary request because it is a plea for the existing social order to be turned on its head and for the world to be governed and controlled by a new set of ethics and rules: for all social and political interaction to be transformed almost completely.

“Your Kingdom come…”

Be careful what you pray for…

Part of the problem is, of course, that we have created Jesus in our own image. We want to think of him as meek and mild, perhaps a white man, gently strolling round the Israeli countryside, talking in happy metaphors about sheep and lights on a hill and performing wonderful miracles for his adoring crowds. We may find it uncomfortable to think of a man who looked a whole lot more like Yassar Arafat than David Beckham; a Palestinian tradesman, on the streets of what is now Gaza and the West Bank, a social revolutionary who was dedicated to denouncing the oppressive Jewish systems and challenging the pseudo-authority of the occupying Roman army.

But that’s Jesus of Nazareth: the Palestinian liberator speaking out against the forces of injustice, who was not afraid to say, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword…”

Perhaps that is an uncomfortable image for some; but it is historical truth.

“Your Kingdom come…”

Be careful what you pray for…

So in our Gospel reading today, Jesus gives a number of parables, beginning each one with the phrase, “The Kingdom of heaven is like…” And we hear that phrase and we settle back in the pew or our chair and we get ourselves comfortable, because we know that we are about to hear Jesus spin another pretty little story for us.

No – it doesn’t work like that.

When this Palestinian revolutionary says, “The Kingdom of heaven is like…”, there should be a shiver running up our spine and we should be on edge. Because this Palestinian revolutionary has dedicated his life – and death - to taking us right outside our comfort zones and confronting us with the harsh reality of Truth.

So he begins in verse 31 with the parable of the mustard seed: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

We find that comforting, don’t we? Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, telling us that big things can come from small beginnings. We link it to Jesus’ saying that we are to have faith like a mustard seed and we think therefore that it is OK to only have a little bit of faith because that will be enough. So we can all relax. We don’t need to work particularly hard at being a Christian. We don’t need to devote ourselves too much to the spiritual disciplines - because Gentle Jesus has told us that a little bit of faith is perfectly adequate.

But Gentle Jesus didn’t tell this parable.

This parable was told by Jesus, the Palestinian revolutionary who was prepared to live and die to see a new world order come in to being…

What would the Palestinian masses have heard when Jesus told them this parable? They would have heard a story about a mustard plant, which was an invasive plant, going deep into the soil. They would have picked up on the real threat in this story. Because the sower plants the seed, perhaps in desperation and out of his poverty, in the hope that it might produce something usable very quickly. But there is also the danger that the mustard plant will grow and grow and invade the rest of the soil and take over that part of the landscape, making the soil unusable for any other form of vegetation.

And, of course, that invasive property is exactly what Jesus wants to highlight because his mustard seed becomes a tree and the birds come to nest in it.

The Kingdom of God, for Jesus the Palestinian revolutionary, is completely invasive. It might look small and it may even be sown in desperation and out of poverty - but it will grow and grow and will invade the land and eventually become a sanctuary for others to find rest in.

The Kingdom of God, therefore, comes as a threat to those who cling to the old world order. Jesus of Nazareth wants God’s Kingdom to invade and dominate the land and that is the message he is prepared to live and die for.

And if we have not yet got the point about the Kingdom of God being threatening, uncontainable and invasive, Jesus the Palestinian revolutionary follows it up with another little story in verse 33: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Ah, the Great British Bake Off…now we know what Gentle Jesus is talking about! The woman in her kitchen, kneeding the dough whilst her children play around her, the lovely smell of freshly baking bread hangs in the air, perhaps the kitchen door is opening out onto a lovely little garden where the husband sits and reads his newspaper with the faithful family dog sitting at his feet. An idyllic family scene – a comfortable image for us – from Gentle Jesus.

But Gentle Jesus didn’t tell this parable.

This parable was told by Jesus, the Palestinian revolutionary, who was prepared to live and die to see a new world order come in to being…

So what did yeast mean to the first hearers of this parable? Well, of course, yeast was to be avoided at the most holy times of the year: Unleavened Bread was the order of the day. And elsewhere, Jesus used the symbol of yeast to describe the insidious, subversive behaviour of the Pharisees. For those people who lived in an agricultural, even nomadic culture, yeast was pretty hard to handle. It was unpredictable, it bubbled up, it oozed, it collapsed, it grew again. It was hard to handle in that culture and, at certain times, was to be avoided altogether.

So again, Jesus is not giving us a neat and comfortable image here: the Kingdom of Heaven is unpredictable. It bubbles up from within and completely transforms the environment in which it grows.

Mustard seeds and Yeast. These are uncomfortable products. They are subversive. They cannot be contained or controlled. They grow in secret and then, all of a sudden, the host environment becomes transformed.

And the effects of the seed and the yeast will do what it wants to do: the sower and the baker cannot control them.

The Kingdom of heaven is subversive and we cannot control it.

As we come to think about developing our Mission Action Plan, there is an important lesson for us here, of course…

And I think this is why the 5 Marks of Mission are so important for us. Because, as I’ve said before, we need to move away from the idea that Mission is just about evangelism and overseas aid. There is something subversive and deeply challenging, deeply uncomfortable about Mission and that is reflected in the 4th Mark of Mission - which is about transforming the unjust structures of society - and the 5th Mark of Mission - which is about treasuring and stewarding God’s creation.

It will be important for us at St. Andrew’s that, as we move forward in mission together, we have a holistic and balanced approach; that we don’t just focus on those areas and activities that we find comfortable but that we are prepared to play our part in the subversive, socially challenging agenda of God’s Kingdom.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like…”

“Your Kingdom come”.

Be careful what you pray for…

But as well as being subversive, we need to recognise that the Kingdom of heaven is messy, too.

Now, this is an important principle for us to grasp because there is a tendency for Christians to want church to be a beautiful place, where we sing beautiful hymns and use beautiful liturgy in the comfort of a beautiful building. Now, don’t hear me saying that these things are unimportant; last week, you will remember that I preached about the importance of the church building as a sacred place, a holy place, not to be taken for granted.

But if we are to grow as a church, we will need to forsake aspects of beauty for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Let me say that again, because this is really, really important. We will need to forsake aspects of beauty for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

The truth is that the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven, is not always a particularly beautiful place to be. The Kingdom of heaven can be a messy place; at times, it can be an ugly place. If we think that Gentle Jesus is telling these parables, we might expect the Kingdom of heaven to be beautiful and peaceful.

But Gentle Jesus didn’t tell this parable.

This parable was told by Jesus, the Palestinian revolutionary who was prepared to live and die to see a new world order come in to being…

Instead, he prepares us for a kingdom that can be as messy and ugly as it is beautiful, verse 47: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, and sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.”

When the fishermen cast out their nets in the Sea of Galilee, they were primarily wanting to catch three types of fish: sardines, barbels, and musht. These were the staple fish diet of the population and would have been considered of worth. But the truth is, of course, when the nets were drawn back to shore, they wouldn’t just have been full of sardines, barbels and musht. There were 23 species of fish in the Sea of Galilee at that time. So alongside the sardines and barbels and musht, their nets would have been full of Cat-fish and Anchor - both considered unclean to the Jewish people - and eels and shellfish and all sorts of others too. So the trawl of the net would bring together the clean and the unclean, the good and the bad, and the task of the fisherman was to separate them out ready for the market place. Fishing was a messy business.

And again, this is important for us as we move towards creating our Mission Action Plan because it will be, in part, a messy business. Over the next few years, we will not be creating a beautiful church together. We will be sharing hospitality together in a messy place. A messy place where mistakes will be made. A messy place where children will be noisy because they are having fun. A messy place where alcoholics and drug addicts will find a welcome. A messy place where the theologically literate will nurture the theologically illiterate.

And it is in all the mess that we will create together that beauty will be found. Because, as Jesus told us in the parable in verse 45, it takes a lot of searching to find a pearl. But once it is found, the search will have been worth it…

“Your kingdom come…”

Be careful what you pray for - because the Kingdom of heaven is like that proclaimed by Jesus, the Palestinian revolutionary, not like some imaginary Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. It is subversive and it is messy, and if we want to embrace the Kingdom here at St Andrew’s, we must embrace the revolutionary nature of the kingdom and the inevitable mess that this causes…

Jesus, the Palestinian revolutionary walked the streets of Israel. He walked the streets of Gaza and the West Bank. And when he saw social injustice and oppression and marginalisation, he spoke out against it. His was a subversive ministry – his was a messy ministry.

Jesus was a Palestinian revolutionary who was prepared to die for the liberation of his people because he knew that the coming of the Kingdom of heaven was the ultimate goal of liberation. That was the mission of Jesus of Nazareth. And we, as a church, as invited into that mission today. It will be uncomfortable, it will be messy - but that’s the Kingdom of heaven for you.

Are we truly going to become a Mission Shaped Church? Then we need to pray, “Your Kingdom come”.

But be careful what you pray for…