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## “A Living Parable”

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### Intro.

You won't like to hear this but many times the parables are distressing or like art are hard to understand! This is particularly true of today's Gospel reading parables!

The Tate is an institution that houses, in a network of four art museums, the United Kingdom's national collection of British art, and international modern and contemporary art. It holds both the national collection of British art from 1500 to the present day and international modern and contemporary art. The British art is represented by artists chosen for their contribution to Britain's history and development rather than their nationality alone.

Tracey Emin's art work *My Bed* was short-listed for the Turner Prize in 1999. Displayed in the Tate it literally was a bed: “rumpled sheets, pillows, tights and a towel—all stained. Alongside the bed were vodka bottles, slippers, underwear, empty cigarette packets, and other detritus. It caused great media furor and was eventually sold to Charles Saatchi I think for £150,000 (pounds). Earlier this year it was auctioned for a staggering £2.2 million.”

Many times what we see is not what we value...many times what we hear is not what it originally meant, and many times what we consider as nice “country stories” are actually fascinating tales that if we carefully listen will transform our lives forever.

### Bible Context

Think about this, what we just listened to in today's gospel reading was originally heard by people who live in a faraway land, with a different culture and understanding, people that for us represent an offbeat understanding of the world, humanity and God. What if we use their ears to

hear these stories? But who were they? Well, they were a community of Jews and gentiles, a community of believers, the first readers, listeners of the gospel, fascinating!

According to various Bible commentaries on the gospel of Matthew the disciples served as models for the Christians, but they were living in a hostile world, rejected by the Romans and the Jews. For Matthew the followers of Jesus constitute the people of God, and they probably experienced and saw the horrific events of 70 AD; death, political and religious persecution, and the destruction of the temple. Let's remember also that the notion of Israel as a prosperous and blessed nation no longer existed. According to the Mathew's gospel commentator Daniel Harington; "The challenge facing all Jews was to discover how Israel's tradition might continue." The gospel also critiques the way in which the Jews rejected Jesus as the messiah, in the words of the scholar Bart Ehrman "he virulently attacks the Jewish leaders of his day." Tough times, hard circumstances, political, social, religious and economic turmoil.

### **The first listeners.**

Let's think about the people of Jesus' time. Pastor Christopher Burkett states, "*If we are to hear the voice of Jesus in these parables, we have to hear them as disturbing and challenging, not reassuring and familiar. We have to hear them with the ears of the camel herder.*" I could add; we have to hear them with the ears of the oppressed woman, the tired field worker, the underrated child, the outcast leper, the poor widow, the hopeless family that has to pay tribute etc. We have to hear the stories with their ears not with the ears of *the supermarket shopper*, the wealthy, blessed and privileged.

Burkett also says: "*The people who heard these parables first heard them not as homely and comforting but as subversive.*" Why? Well, we all tend to picture a mustard seed as a tiny seed that produces a plant. The reality is that for the people of that time, the mustard plant was a big

bush, a plant that grows and grows invasively and limits the use of the soil for other products.

Yes, today's popular interpretation could be that God can do something wonderful with even the tiniest bit of faith. But the first listeners hear a *frightening tale of an invasive plant sowed perhaps in desperation because it grows and therefore might produce something usable quickly, but with it is the threat that because it is so hard to get rid of it may stultify the land and make it unavailable for future better crops.*

In another parable Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. God is like a woman ...the miracle of leavening and transformation ...through the active nature of God. That's how we hear that nice little domestic tale of a woman kneading dough. Her careful handling is rewarded by a huge risen mixture that will nourish many. But Christopher Burkett says that more likely *the other hears it as speaking of corruption—after all in the Jewish faith leaven is the thing to be avoided at the holiest time of the year, Passover. To the nomad yeast is a difficult thing, it oozes and bubbles and collapses, it's hard to handle when you need to be ready to follow the animals quickly. It's a kind of contamination of the flour that otherwise is easily handled and cooked. And what she produces is enough to feed a hundred. How do you pack that quickly onto a camel?* Jesus told this parable to people much closer to the herdsman's experience than to today's Wholefoods shoppers. *More than four out of every five people who lived in the Palestine of Jesus' day lived nearer to the experience of the camel herder than the today's Amazon shopper. They lived a subsistence existence—and it is out of that living that they heard these parables.*

*The people who heard these parables heard them not as homely and comforting but as subversive; for Jesus speaks of a kingdom that is invasive, unstoppable, a nuisance, urgent, shocking, and abundant.* I really believe that in order to see and experience the kingdom of God

we must to be open and listen, look and sense. At first the stories are hard to understand but Jesus not only gave them words but his presence and love. By his loving heart, Jesus portrayed the very image of grace and compassion for the people of his time, healing the sick, giving hope to the rejected and bringing a new era of promise and peace for everyone. The first listeners understood that the kingdom of God represented a challenge but the result would be much better than the hopeless suffering on this earth. Today we are called to experience and share the powerful message of the gospel! And the message of the kingdom is on many occasions like art....

### **Conclusion**

Yes, the kingdom of heaven is like Tracey Emin's *My Bed*. All who see it, judge it. To some it is harrowingly frank, moving and authentic; to others it is a sham, distasteful and disgusting. No one who sees it is indifferent; it draws from each condemnation or praise. Emin herself says, "art is for feeling not for looking." In the same way, the kingdom of God is not just listening to nice tales or looking from afar at the ancient stories of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is waiting to be experience and living in a transformative and many times disruptive ways. Do you want to listen to another parable? Do you want to experience Jesus in a transformative way? Do you want to participate in the Kingdom of God now in the midst of a global pandemic? When? How? Where? Let's all be a living parable to the world by modeling the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Amen!