

Sermon on Sunday 17th June Trinity 3 by The Reverend Canon David Hodgson, All Saints Church Wokingham

Gospel Reading Mark Chapter 4 verses 26 to 34

I managed to go through the whole of my secondary education without a single lesson in biological sciences. Forgive me if I've mentioned this before! It still astonishes me when I think about it. And now although I have some understanding of concepts like germination, photosynthesis and transpiration I feel the ordinary Palestinian farmer of Jesus's day would have had more understanding of the processes of plant growth than I do even now.

The rural and village audience of Jesus' teaching was well aware of how the tiniest seed can become a huge shrub. The point was not to argue from their ignorance or amazement. Jesus was using what was well-known in the people's experience and daily lives to explain the more intangible idea of the kingdom of God. How can I depict the kingdom of God or by what parable present it, we hear Jesus saying almost to himself? How to help us understand the presence of God, the influence of God and the coming justice of God? It is what Jesus taught us to pray for every day to God; "Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven" "What does that look like?" Jesus might have said if he was a modern-day business coach.

Later this morning in the 11 o'clock service with families and younger children we'll be planting small seeds in plastic cups so that they can watch them germinate over the next few days hopefully, and then they could plant them out and see them grow. In this case they are climbing French beans, rather than mustard shrubs.

When I read this morning's gospel passage through again in preparation for today, the phrase that struck me most clearly was "when the seed is planted" - I was looking at a different translation than the one we've used this morning which refers to the seed being sown. It was the phrase "when it is planted" that leapt out at me.

The bean seeds we are using with the children and families at 11am have been happily kept in their packet for several months and they have done nothing - they might as well be small stones for the amount of evidence of life they have shown during that time. It is when they are planted that life will spring forth from them and they will become large plants offering nourishment. Just as the tiny mustard-seed in Jesus' example becomes "the greatest of all shrubs" only when it is planted.

So, it occurred to me on returning to this parable that the key action on which the point Jesus is making hangs, is the planting of the seed. If the seed is not planted this wonderful transformation from a tiny apparently dead item into a life-giving bush, does not happen. Everything depends on its being planted; and when it is, then we know, Jesus is saying to his audience of farming people - we know - a tiny seed can bring about a large result.

So, what might this look like when applied to the kingdom of God? Isn't Jesus saying here - look you know perfectly well from your daily life that from planting a tiny seed great things can happen - so God's kingdom also is like that, a great life-giving result can come from a tiny start, but a start must be made. Just as you could have all the mustard seeds and all the bean seeds you've ever seen, there'll not be a bean plant, or a mustard shrub grown unless a seed is planted. So too God's kingdom is like that. It will grow, it can grow, from the tiniest beginnings to bring abundant life, when it is planted.

Well the first thing we can infer from what this parable teaches is that just as the farmer needs to lay claim to the promise and the power contained within the seeds by actually planting them, so also, we need to take some action in order to lay claim to the promise and the power of God's kingdom. It's interesting to see that in all of these parables by Jesus about the kingdom of God collected in this chapter here by Mark's Gospel there is a focus on action that needs to be taken if

we are to access God's kingdom. In the largest parable of this section - the well-known parable of the sower in which the seed falls on all kinds of ground from stony to fertile, there is an explanation provided by Jesus which culminates in a call to his followers to hear the word, to welcome it and so bear fruit. In a parable about not putting the lamp under a basket or under the bed, there is a call to pay attention to what you hear. And in the other parable to depict the kingdom of God which we heard in this morning's gospel reading about seeds sprouting and growing without the farmer needing to observe them, the farmer needs to take the action of harvesting the crop. In all of these pictures and examples which Jesus gave to describe what the kingdom of God is like; some action is required by us in order to lay claim to the promise and the life of God's kingdom.

I'm reminded here of a saying from the English spiritual writer the 14th century lay woman known to us as Mother Julian of Norwich: "Peace and love are ever in us being and working, but we are not always in peace and in love". Here Julian of Norwich seems to be referencing a saying of Jesus about the kingdom of God from Luke's gospel. (17:21) It was Jesus' answer to a question put to him by his detractors the Pharisees. They asked him: "When is the kingdom of God coming?", Jesus' answer was that the kingdom of God does not come as something one observes, you can't say look here it is or there it is - but says Jesus "The kingdom of God is within you". Some translations have "among you" instead of "within you" but there is a strong case for the "within you" being the better way to convey the meaning in English.

So, then the message of Jesus in the gospels about God's kingdom is that God's kingdom is just here; God's kingdom is right here. The first words that Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel make that very claim. When he returns from the time in the wilderness after his baptism he announces: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". Or as the American biblical scholar David Bentley Hart translates the same sentence; "The proper time has been fulfilled; the Kingdom of God has drawn near, change your hearts and have faith in the good tidings."

The kingdom of God's love and peace is with us, is within us, and among us already - this is a gift already given freely out of God's love for the world that came to light and was achieved in what Christ did. Yet it is also clear from the teaching of Jesus in the gospels that God's kingdom cannot be realised unless we respond and take action. However, tiny and inconsequential our action may seem, like the smallest seed, there is a potential for great change and abundance of life. Change your hearts; have faith - these are actions on our part that need to be done if we are to see God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer "Your kingdom come" in effect then we are praying God will change us and enable us to do what God needs us to do, to respond and to claim the presence and the power of the kingdom of God. God's peace and love are ever in us being and working, we do not always claim the promise and the power of Christ in us; hence the need for action, to change our hearts, to have faith.

Secondly, this gospel encourages us to have the faith that when we do respond and take action though it may seem a very small and vulnerable thing, like the mustard seed, we should know - just as we know small seeds can grow huge plants - we should know and be confident that small acts of faith and love can and will cause God's presence and influence to grow, producing an abundance of life.

There are many examples in the world today of people suffering, in pain and in need, as a result of a lack of compassion for them, a lack of justice for them. It can seem like nothing much can be done. Like there can be no real end to these problems. In those situations, it feels like God's kingdom is very far away. And yet God is as near in those situations as anywhere; though we are not always in God's kingdom and seeds of life remain unplanted, hard as stone.

What actions of faith and love - to plant the seed of God's kingdom that it may grow - can we take? The first is prayer. Prayer and action are not exclusive opposites. Praying is the most

powerful of all actions. What could be a more powerful way to plant the seed of God's kingdom than to seek God's presence and God's love and to pray for people in need, for situations in need - to focus our attention in Christ on them, to lift them into God's presence and seek God's blessing upon them. Prayer is the most powerful action and is a necessary action if we want to see God's kingdom grow. But it is not the only action needful either.

Muslims have just celebrated Eid, the festival that comes at the end of the month of fasting, Ramadan. One of the attractions of Islam as a world faith I think is that it sets out in a clear way what actions Muslims should do to serve God. There are five pillars. You can certainly Google them to know more about them; those in school today and in the last 30 years or so will have been taught about them. (Oh yes - that's another thing I was never taught in my top northern grammar school despite the fact that 50,000 Muslims lived within two miles of it!). One of those five pillars is prayer. Another one however is love in action, especially for the poor and those in need.

In the Christian community the Bible has many examples of actions by which we claim the promise and presence of God's kingdom - the Hebrew prophets urge us to do justice and to have compassion; the letters of Paul and the other apostles and evangelists in many places urge always us to give practical expression to love. "Be doers of the word" wrote Saint James, "and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

Jesus said: "What can we say God's kingdom is like? What story can we use to explain it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. But when you plant the seed, it grows. It becomes the largest of all garden plants."

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