

Trinity 3. June 16th 2024

Ezekiel 17.22-24, Mark 4.26-34

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

When I used to lecture undergraduates, I would often begin by saying something along the lines “As you will remember, in the last lecture.....” and would look out on a sea of blank faces who were probably trying to remember which day of the week it was, rather than the lecture the week before. I suspect if I said “As you will remember from my last sermon...” the reaction would be pretty much the same. But in my last sermon, I did try to make the point that St. Mark tends to group the material in his gospel thematically, rather than chronologically. And we see that in the readings today, where the subject is the Kingdom of God, and the imagery of soil, seed and harvest is the same. And, again as I moaned several sermons ago, the lectionary does not serve us well here, as the verses directly before our readings relate the parable of the Sower, in which the Sower scattered the seed widely, with some falling onto the path, some onto rocky ground, some amongst thorns and only some onto ground where it could grow and thrive. A very similar theme and set of imagery to today’s reading, and they obviously belong together, and I will look at all three today.

But before going on to think about the readings that we have before us, we need to think about what was meant by the kingdom of God. In Jesus’s time there was an expectation of God’s direct intervention into the affairs of the world to restore all things to how they should be, the kingship of God. This would be preceded by the arrival of a Messiah figure, often thought to be modelled on the Son of Man figure from the prophet Daniel (again mentioned in my last sermon!) and would culminate in a universal judgement. We can see something of this expectation in the ministry of John the Baptist. We read his words to the crowds who came out to see him in the wilderness.

‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

We have here the harvesting imagery of judgement that occurs throughout scripture. But Jesus redefined the concept of the Kingdom of God, making it more intimate and personal and focussed on himself. From later in his ministry we read

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’

The apocalyptic element is still there in Jesus’ reference of himself as the Son of Man, who will come in great glory, in the letters of St Paul, and in the visions of St John recorded in the book of Revelation. But from Jesus’s point of view, at least in the immediate short term, the kingdom of God was about the rule of God the King in the lives of individuals, and

through them spreading into the world around them. A rule that will eventually become universal.

So back to today's readings. You can imagine someone asking Jesus "What is the Kingdom of God" and he tells the parable of the sower, all about seeds and crops. Then the question, "But what is the Kingdom of God really about", which elicits the parable of the seed falling into the ground and eventually bearing fruit. The perhaps another exasperated question "Come on tell us what you really mean". And he tells them the parable of the mustard seed. Now almost certainly these parables weren't all told together, but I suspect I would have found Jesus really, really infuriating for not answering a direct question. Instead, his answers were enigmatic and elusive – and indeed forced his hearers to think, which is without doubt the mark of a good teacher, infuriating or not.

But let's briefly consider each one – and here I include the parable of the Sower as it really is part of the sequence, whatever the lectionary implies. Here we see the seed being scattered onto different sorts of ground – the path, stony ground, amongst thorns, good soil, and consequently withering, or being choked, or producing a huge crop. And this one Jesus translates for his disciples and for us, although the metaphor is still somewhat vague – but basically seems to say that the soil into which the seeds are sown is some sort of representation of the hearers of the word of God, the seed of the Kingdom. Some will simply not receive the word at all, some will receive it but not endure when things get difficult, some will let the word be choked by worldly affairs, and only some will bear the fruit of the kingdom in their lives. The challenge then is to prepare ourselves to be good ground – and here we have an echo of the repentance urged by John, to make ourselves fit for the growth of the kingdom.

The second parable, the first of today's readings, suggests again that the seed is again the seed of the Kingdom of God. Our role is to plant it through our witness and our service, but in the end its growth is all down to God – the provider of the soil, the wind and the rain. This can only be a comfort to faithful Christians watching and waiting for the growth of the kingdom and the church. At the end we have the harvest imagery of gathering all into the kingdom of God – the use of the word sickle in scripture is usually indicative of some sort of judgement.

Finally, the third parable is about the mustard seed – small enough, but not the smallest, so a degree of parabolic hyperbole here, Again the smallest seed, the smallest acts of witness and service, can grow into a substantial bush. The reference to the birds of the air making their nest in it almost certainly echoes prophecies such as the one in today's reading from Ezekiel where the same imagery is used for a place of protection as in the Old Testament reading.

Under it every bird shall live, in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

The kingdom of God, grown from small things, becomes a place of safety for those assailed by trauma and torment.

So we can see in these three parables, although the basic theme is similar, the imagery changes, the metaphor is elusive – but perhaps to sum up, our role in bringing about the

kingdom of God is to prepare ourselves to be fit vessels, through repentance and amendment of life as the liturgy says; to sow the seed of the kingdom with others and in the world around us by simple acts of witness and service; to encourage that growth and be fruitful ourselves; and to trust God for the growth of the kingdom in others and in the world around us.

But I think there is more that can be said. Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds that followed him, and only a little more directly to his disciples – a technique that both hid his message, but also allowed it have even deeper meanings. Whilst I have problems with the more, let is say, ambitious interpretations of scripture, such as allegory for example and I much prefer to concentrate on the plain meaning of the text – there are passages in scripture that can be interpreted more imaginatively and personally. Much of the Old Testament, particularly the psalms and the prophets, is poetry and can speak to us, as does all poetry, on lots of different levels. That passage from Ezekiel for example will bear the weight of much consideration and reflection. The same is true for the parables. They were designed to make the listeners think for themselves, and reflect on what they might be saying, and as such I think it justifiable to use them as a basis for further reflections. For those who are into gardening for example, these parables offer a way into such reflections– to bring their own experience and insights into what Jesus was saying about the Kingdom of God as a seed planted into the soil. So, in what I'm going to say next, I'm going to indulge myself somewhat, and reflect on these parables from my own experience and background – perhaps as an example as to how you might use them.

You will have gathered from the way I started this sermon that I worked in academia – as an engineering academic, mainly looking at the effect of wind on buildings, vehicles, bridge and so on. In 1987, just after the Great Storm that caused such carnage in our woods and forests, a colleague of mine knocked on my office door and suggested we should do some research on wind effects on trees. This started in a small way, and eventually transformed into a long term and wide-ranging series of projects looking at the effect of wind and rain on cereal crops such as wheat, barley and rape. A bit like the mustard seed producing a great bush! In high wind and rain crops can be laid flat, or lodge, with major yield and economic loss. The approach we took was to build a mathematical model of crops in wind, carry out experiments to measure crop and soil characteristic and crop behaviour in the field, during periods of high winds and rain of course (a job for research students of course, some of whom have still to forgive me) and use all this information to identify those crop and soil characteristics that made the crops susceptible to lodging. And this could then be addressed in selective crop breeding. Overall, this was probably one of the most consequential bits of work I have been involved in and I am told our work saves the UK farming industry many millions of pounds each year. But the point I want to make here is that the important thing to emerge for me from this work is that the problem is a really complex one – soil characteristics vary with geology, what has been grown there beforehand, and weather; each plant crop is by no means identical and plant heights, roots vary widely; and of course the wind and the rain are uncontrollable. All could only be described in terms of probabilities. And the challenge of the project was coping with this variability and unpredictability.

And all of this gives me a personal basis for reflection on the parables that we have had today – this idea of variability, of randomness if you like. I would see the soil into which the seeds were sown as both us and the environment in which we live, the soil formed over the millennia by geological forces and human action, and ourselves reflecting our own genetic variability, our own different personalities, and the diversity of our society in which we have been born and brought up. The seeds contain in their genome all the information necessary for their growth, and for their variability – and as the word of God, all that is necessary to us to become who we should be, each the same in many ways, but each different; and the wind and the rain in all their wildness reflects the work of the Holy Spirit, forming us and enlivening us, blowing us about a bit. For me, a picture of the complexity of God's work in the world, the God in control of the randomness of our existence, the diverse nature of the Kingdom of God in our lives and the life of our society.

Fanciful stuff you might say – well maybe. But the parables have been given to us to use to understand in our own way what the Kingdom of God is about. They are an invitation to use our imaginations.

He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

I would suggest then these readings are an invitation to let these parables be mustard seeds for our imagination, for us to interpret and reflect on, to make them our own, and let them to grow into a fuller realisation of what the Kingdom of God is about for each one of us personally.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen