

from small beginnings...

a sermon preached on the

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the lections: Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Psalm 92; 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17; Mark 4: 26-34.

There is something in these Kingdom parables about seeds and sowing that makes immediate good sense to us. We all know the ways in which great things can spring from small beginnings: the single word or touch that becomes a celebrated romance, the small lie that burgeons into a life of deception, a chance meeting of like minded people that leads to a significant political or social movement. In most languages there exist sayings that have the same meaning: in English, 'great oaks from little acorns grow', in Chinese and in Arabic 'the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step' and of course we have all heard seemingly minor events described as 'the thin edge of the wedge' or 'the camel's nose is under the tent'.

The bible itself is full of stories which make the same point: the tiny band of slaves becomes a great people; the young shepherd boy grows up to be a mighty king; the struggling nation the context and catalyst for God's universal saving work. Sometimes it seems the significance of the words of Jesus seem subtle and complex; in our Gospel reading this morning from Mark's record the meaning seems clear and sensible and uncomplicated. Indeed, these 'seeds sayings' are not so much parables as they are proverbs, indisputable illustrations of what most people know already to be true.

But if they are merely self-evident truisms, why did the writer of Mark's Gospel bother with them? As a general rule, the parables of Jesus that were most precious to the earliest Christian Communities were those that seemed to defy common sense, rather than to affirm it. A stranger on a dangerous road should keep walking, not stop to help an injured person. A shepherd who has lost one of his hundred sheep should take care of the ninety-nine, not go chasing after a single animal. A father should be making his prodigal son pay for the error of his ways, and not put on a lavish party. It is the 'sting in the tail' of Jesus' parables, their unexpected twist of logic, which makes them so penetrating and challenging. But these 'seeds parables' seem to be in a different category altogether; they seem to be simply a matter of proverbial common sense.

To those in a crisis situation, however, common sense is sometimes more difficult to accept than irrational visions. And to the community of faith which Mark was addressing – afflicted and persecuted, fractious and anxious – the difficulty was acute. They were perfectly ready and willing to believe that the Kingdom of God would be one that would turn things upside down, which would defy logic. They were perfectly ready and willing to believe that the Kingdom of God would be one in which the last would be first and the first last, in which the poor and the mourners and the meek would find places of honour while the rich and the powerful were turned away with nothing. They were not only ready and willing to believe these things about the Kingdom, they were staking their very lives on them!

But to believe that the Kingdom was coming in the same slow, barely perceptible way that seeds sprout and plants grow, well this was simply impossible! After all, Jesus had come; he who in his life and work, his healing and his teaching was a living, breathing parable of the Kingdom, he who was surely the long-promised Messiah had come at last.

And if Jesus had come, should the Kingdom not come as well – all at once, full blown, complete and perfect? To those waiting on tip-toe for the Kingdom of God, Jesus' 'seeds parables' do not make good sense at all. The Kingdom should not come like the unhurried growing of a seed, but like the sudden exploding of a bomb!

But Jesus is saying that, once again, expectations of the Kingdom have to be turned upside down. He is saying that there will be a waiting-time between the inauguration of the kingdom and its final consummation, a waiting-time much like the waiting-time between the seed and the shrub, the planting and the harvest. And to those earliest followers of Jesus who had waited and waited for the Messiah, and who saw in Jesus the fulfilment of their deepest hopes yet wondered when it would all come right, this must have been deeply reassuring. And for those in later generations, who must, in Paul's words 'walk by faith, not by sight', the seeds parables do make sense of the question, 'Why has the Kingdom not yet come in its fullness?'

But the questions do not stop here. If there is a necessary waiting-time which separates the coming of Jesus and the full establishment of the reign of God over all things, then how are we to live in it? How do we act in the time between the announcement and the event, the seed and the harvest? What kind of discipleship is called for if we accept that the seed has been sown and the Kingdom is growing secretly and will become a great harvest, a mighty bush?

First, the seeds parables tell us not to take ourselves too seriously. The Kingdom that is coming is God's Kingdom; it will come in God's good time, and according to its own natural patterns of growth. It is tempting for many of us to think that without our constant work and vigilance the whole edifice of Christian faith will collapse; we find ourselves continually pulling up our spiritual endeavours by the roots to see if they are growing well! But like the person who sows, we are called to recognise that the Kingdom's coming doesn't depend on us, but rather on the will and purpose of God. And like the person who sows, we are called to see that much of the Kingdom's growth is in secret, in ways we cannot perceive, but even so, the harvest is assured.

But as a general policy for Christian living, 'Let go and let God!' clearly has some difficulties. It can lead to complacency, indifference, and other-worldliness. But, ironically, the same parables that warn us about taking ourselves too seriously, also warn us to take ourselves seriously enough! Most gardeners reading this parable will know that the mustard is not a perennial plant, but an annual. It dies back each year and its perpetuation depends on producing renewed crops of tiny flowers and seeds. These minute offspring of the mustard may seem insignificant, but because they are themselves the fruits of the mustard, they ensure its continued life and growth.

In the same way, our small human acts of love and compassion and hope may seem insignificant, but when they are the fruits of our own sense of being grafted into the Kingdom of God in Christ, they can have profound and far-reaching effects. In these terms, the life of Jesus himself was a 'seeds parable'. To all outward appearances it was a small, failed life: healing a child here, speaking with compassion to a woman at a well there, eating a meal with a tax collector, telling a story. But because these acts, this life, was so firmly grafted into the Kingdom, its ultimate significance is beyond calculation.