

SERMON FOR 11th Sunday in Ordinary
Time 17.6.18
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD
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I love having a garden, it is a great way to do something when you need to think, it also provides one with a great sense of excitement as you watch your crop grow and finally be ready to eat. However gardens can be a lot of work. This is especially true in the height of summer. With the warm weather comes great growth, which is great for your vegetables – however, this growth also includes the weeds. As much as I attempt to get rid of the weeds I find myself feeling a little like the farmer in Jesus’ parable

today, without any of my own effort these weeds have grown back in a dramatic way, more so than my crop!

This, is the type of process Jesus is describing in today’s parable. It speaks of a process in which one has no control over the outcome, with imagery of passivity, combined with fantastic and disproportionate growth. In addition, what makes this parable even more interesting is Jesus’ flat out reluctance to share its meaning, save with the few disciples around him, and not even, they understand. This ‘not understanding’ is a hallmark theme in Mark’s gospel, the ‘messianic secret’ as it is called, the fact that even though the disciples are with Jesus for three years they still don’t get what he is about. Then there are the poor crowds who gather to hear his teaching, he does not explain the parables

to them at all! However, we gather from the text that even if he did, they, like the disciples would not understand. Like the farmer in Jesus' parable, for some reason "They do not know how".

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It is unsettling, that in this part of the bible, which we have come to use as a sort of textbook for faith, is leaving us with more questions than answers. For me, this is what the real reality of faith often is, more open questions, than final statements. The parable of the growing seed seems to be saying this is also true for the Kingdom of God. So what is this 'Kingdom of God' Jesus speaks of? The Kingdom of God phrase is a deeply fascinating one - as well as complex.

The phrase "Kingdom of God" or "dominion of God" depending how you translate it is found fourteen times in Mark's Gospel. It is an ancient metaphor not easily translated into today's culture. In the first century, power and dominion in the known world belonged to Caesar. Early Christians preached that Caesar's Kingdom or dominion has been overtaken by the dominion of God. This was an in-your-face radical claim-defining insiders not by Caesar's proclamation, but by relationship to the community that followed Jesus. In various twenty-century cultures, the claim of radical inclusion is seeing expression in terms reflecting egalitarian relationships in God's community, so some now translate it as Kin-dom of God. Why the re-thinking? Well many are uncomfortable with the

Kingdom's military overtones, and archaic imagery. You could however move beyond this to translate Kingdom to represent today's kingdoms' or dominions, those super powers or corporations that now rule us through power and money. Whatever your thoughts, it is a Kingdom that is represented by all that Jesus affirmed in his ministry, peace, love, grace and an opportunity for all to turn from those things that injure and destroy life, to the things that are life creating. But what this truly looks like, and how it is achieved is a daunting question.

This particular parable would have produced plenty of head scratching for those first listeners, as it does for us today. It raises such questions as 'do I have no role in the spread of this Kingdom?' 'What about human agency'? 'What about

our need to have it right?' It seems the Kingdom is presented as what one theologian describes as a "sleepy, restful trust. It is not like the frenetic busyness of works righteousness, and it is not like the anxious attachment to particular moral or doctrinal positions, defending which we gladly expend all our energy, this is because being busy and dogmatic makes a lot of sense to us. It fits with our normal way of being human." The world around us promotes self-reliance, and the need for accurate scientific knowledge. The problem is that when talking of faith and the cosmos, these black and white realities start to fall apart.

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The good news however is that Jesus offers us a way through the uncertainty of faith. He affirms his listener's anxiousness and offers them an alternative view. He says to them that the Kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms that reign in their present time. It is not like the power hungry Roman Empire, expanding with force and oppression. It is rather a movement of the power of God, mysterious and wonderful, built on the power of unconditional love and grace. A mysterious love and a mysterious grace that is offered without boundaries. A love and grace that he embodies in his life and teaching. It is like the terrific little phrase I recently read in a book, that "Jesus told so many parables he became one." It speaks of the mysterious nature of Jesus and his teachings, at the same time so accessible

and universal yet always enigmatic and unsettling. For those first disciples who faced a future without their teacher, perhaps sensing their inadequacies they would have later reflected on such parables and sighed a breath of fresh air that the risen Christ was at work in the spreading of the Kingdom of God. This didn't mean that they purely sat back, did nothing and hoped God would intervene, but rather gave them confidence that what often seems like a small seed that dies in the ground, is in fact becoming a large tree, we do know how, but that is okay, we are to trust God that it will come to be. It is at once a humbling parable and an exhilarating parable for the followers of Jesus.

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And that is the Good News for us who are followers of Jesus today. It is the fact that we don't have to have it all worked out, we don't have to be anxious over the spread of the Kingdom of God, we don't have to agonise over who's in and who isn't for that is God's work. We are only called to plant that smallest of seeds, allowing God to do the rest. This parable calls us to use our imagination, that is the power of such stories, and it is why they are more powerful than ever I believe in an age when the mystery and surprise of all life, including God, are being squeezed out of our consciousness. Jesus' teaching on the seed as the Kingdom of God draws us in to that mystery, and opens our minds to God's possibilities, possibilities of an expansive and

hopeful future. For me this is good news, God has done it and will continue to do it. Our liturgical cycle reflects this by recounting God's narrative in our lives. It is a story that we embody, and become a part of. This starts with the expectation of Advent last year, then the joy of Christmas where the Word became one of us, then there is the hardship of Lent and Good Friday, the exuberant hope of Easter, and finally a few weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost and the sending of the spirit. So now that leaves us - with the task to trust him who acts and will continue to act through the church and the world. If only we would recognise that sometimes we can only sit back and watch the change of the seasons, observing the weeds grow, and admit to ourselves "we do not know how", yet we recognise our intimacy with

Christ grows as certainly and as effortlessly as the weeds
and grass grow, it is that simple yet profound. Amen