

Revd Canon Jutta Brueck, Great St Mary's Sermon Trinity 3, 16 June 2024 at 10am

Ezekiel 17:22-24

22 Thus says the Lord GOD:

I myself will take a sprig

from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out.

I will break off a tender one

from the topmost of its young twigs;

I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

²³ On the mountain height of Israel

I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.

Under it every kind of bird will live;

in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

²⁴ All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD.

I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree;

I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

⁶ So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. ¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Mark 4.26-34

²⁶ He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

³⁰ He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.'

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

With what can we compare the Kingdom of God?

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Many of us pray on a daily basis 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done.'

If anyone asks you, what is this kingdom of God, you are praying for, what would you say? I imagine most of us would have something to say - yet, when I stop to think about it, I'm quickly aware that I feel I know about the kingdom of God, and at the same time, there is something elusive, that invites me to ponder and look further.

Not surprising given that Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God is always done in parables, many of them quite enigmatic, drawing on examples from daily life in an agricultural society.

There is a lot about sowing and observing plants grow; we have parables about fishing; about yeast permeating dough; or treasure in a field.

This morning's parables are about seeds and growing; I will focus on the second parable, well known – and baffling! – comparing the kingdom of God to a tiny seed that grows into the greatest of all shrubs, with such large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

Have any of you ever been inspired to find out about this 'greatest of all shrubs', perhaps hoping to grow it in your garden? I've never met anybody who has! This greatest of all shrubs turns out to be more like a weed than an attractive garden plant.

There is a lot of humour in this parable, intended to surprise, to make people see things afresh, to convey an important message, to change their perspective.

The lectionary today pairs our gospel with Ezekiel chapter 17. It would have been in the back of Jesus' mind and it gives a wider context for the parable of the mustard seed

I love the poetry in this prophecy, aimed at the poor remnant of Israel, who had lived in exile in Babylon for about half a century. Here, here we have the image of a tender shoot from the top of a cedar being planted, back in Jerusalem, to grow into a noble cedar '*under which every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.*' Now, that makes sense – we can imagine the birds finding shelter in this large, noble tree.

But Jesus turns this into something quite different. He starts with a small mustard seed! Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific like a common and sturdy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Some of Jesus' listeners must have frowned or chuckled. Imagine him speaking today of thistles or ground-ivy- though mustard is bigger and has a range of medicinal qualities.

What this parable tells us about the kingdom of God: it grows! It is not easily eradicated and it doesn't look like a well manicured garden!

Biblical scholars think that the fully grown mustard plant is probably *brassica negra* found in Galilee. Noone, apart from Jesus in this parable, would have thought of it as "the greatest of all shrubs." It can grow dense, but it is hardly magnificent. I wonder if Jesus was saying this tongue in cheek – he clearly wanted to shock people; he wanted invite them into a new way of perceiving greatness and the kingdom of God.

So, the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large shrub that offers protection and shelter.

What is the good news here? What kind of protection can a large shrub, scattered around the countryside offer? Certainly, different from the protection of the noble Lebanon cedar! What's Jesus up to?

Like all the gospels, Mark's gospel is carefully constructed, giving us more and more insight about this Jesus, who reveals himself as the Messiah.

In these parables, Jesus is preparing his hearers and disciples not to expect God's reign to look like an earthly kingdom; not to expect the Messiah to overthrow the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel – the image of the noble cedar.

No, that's not what Jesus is about. Jesus wants his hearers to see in new ways. The kingdom of God he has come to announce, offers protection, just as the noble cedar was expected to do, but this protection is not going to come from worldly or even religious governments and powers.

The protection that Jesus offers lies in having faith – we don't need much - faith, the size of a mustard seed being enough – faith in God, who we know as rock, as shepherd, as father; faith in Jesus Christ who died and rose for us from the dead, and offer us life. Faith that draws us into community of with others, who share our faith, who are seeking God and God's kingdom. And the community of faith, in turn, are called to offer shelter, protection to others, with God at their centre.

Our reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians this morning speaks into this. He makes it explicit: 'we walk by faith, not by sight'; he writes 6 'so, we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord; and, in vs 16: from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; vs 17: if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.'

This is radical stuff. Jane Williams, in a commentary on the passage, suggests that Christians have their own reality system – a system that is informed by the values of the gospel, perhaps best expressed in the sermon of the mount. Or, thinking in IT terms, of ourselves as having a new operating system, a system that enables us more and more to live in God's kingdom. It's the operating system that knows the purpose of our lives is to seek God, God's kingdom, become more Christ-like. It is walking with a new map: the main aim is no longer to keep ourselves safe, but working to please God. We are invited to look at ourselves and the world through the eyes of Christ: each of us is beloved and precious, as is my neighbour. Seeing through the eyes of Christ means to bring people in, not to keep them out; to be part of the reconciling work of Christ.

In practice, this is really hard, as we much prefer to live by sight and our own strength. It's challenging; it calls for more trust, less cynicism; more generosity, less selfishness; more courage, less fear. That's why we pray and attend to our spiritual lives.

Even as people, who practice their faith, participate in the life of the Church, it's often only when our bodies and other human limitations bring us to the edge, that we learn to live by faith. When there is nothing left, but to turn to our faith, to throw ourselves on the mercy of God that we may discover God's grace that carries us when we can't live in our own strength. We gradually notice more and more all the small miracles and blessings that happen when we let God be God.

I think today's gospel is really good news!

And it's especially good news for those who struggle in life. Those, who have little, who have no choice but live by faith; they will discover how God and God's family become their rock more and more.

Those who are dreamers, passionate for the kingdom of God to come among us, who live more for others than themselves, are assured that the seeds they sow, their sacrifices and self-giving love; their generosity and faithfulness, which may look foolish in the eyes of the world, will bear fruit.

And those, who find it hard to live by faith, to really believe that there is a God who is at the centre of creation. They will always be welcome should they find themselves in a place where all they can do is to hand over to God.

And finally, the gospel with all its many parables about seeds, sowers and growing suggests that the kingdom of God has wonderfully permeable edges; I'm sure, it's not confined to the church, but anywhere where people sow seeds of self-giving love, hope and peace.

Jesus' teaching and life were about opening his disciples' hearts and minds to the generous and surprising ways of God, his Father, our creator.

The kingdom of God is all around us – let us open our hearts and minds to see and participate in it.
Amen.