

16Jun2024 Open to Growth

Being open to respond to Jesus instead of forcing our own ways

How many of you are gardeners of some sort. Most of you. So we know the basics of soil preparation, planting, watering, fertilizing. We also know how weeds grow and pests attack the plants in ways we don't appreciate. And we all know that whatever we do to produce the best crop possible or the most beautiful shrubs or flowers, that the weather, pests and weeds can thwart our efforts and that growth itself is determined by the way our creator made plants to be. We can't determine that though people more and more are trying to alter and control the genetics and growing conditions as if they could.

Today we heard two parables of Jesus about what the Kingdom of God is like, that relate to growing plants. These come after the parable that people are most familiar with – about the sower and the soils, which the gospel writers helpfully provided Jesus' explanation for as well. But there is no explanation provided for these two by Mark and the first is not mentioned in the other gospels at all. Unfortunately the private explanations given to his disciples are not included for these though the passage mentions that Jesus did so.

The first parable about the growth of a seed is particularly difficult actually. You see it is basically telling something absolutely obvious to any first century farmer or anyone else for that matter. It would be a bit like me saying 'This thing is like when a person goes to the supermarket and buys some milk and bread and then goes home again and puts the milk in the fridge.' This story is so mundane that his hearers must have been thinking – what on earth is he telling us this absolutely obvious and normal story for?

The key to this is first of all the comment at the end of the passage and the comment made a couple of times earlier in the passage 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' These parables separate those who were the 'insiders', those who were disciples/learners, from those who were outsiders, those who were not

open to what Jesus was proclaiming, that the Kingdom of God is at hand – repent and believe the good news.

Many people listening would just have said, ‘I know things grow like that. You’re not saying anything new.’ And then just moved on. But those who had ears to hear, who are interested in finding out what the story actually means about the Kingdom of God, who have a heart interest, not just an assumed intellectual knowledge and are prepared to respond to what is being said – they are on the way to being insiders, to being disciples – learners from Jesus.

So what does this ordinary story say about the Kingdom of God? The sower doesn’t know how the seed sprouts and grows. He just passes the days until it happens. The earth produces of itself – the word translated ‘of itself’ is the word we get automatic from – the earth produces automatically the stalk, head and grain in the head. That is God does it (divine passive) - in a way we can’t fathom. The Kingdom of God is also insignificant like a seed when it starts and it grows in a way only God knows and determines. There is no strategy or programme that we can put in place to make it grow, no resolutions of synod or vestry, no funding grants, or diocesan or church strategy, nothing that we can do to make it grow. Nor will we understand the mechanics of it growing. It is an organic thing not something mechanical we can tweak or manage. We may sow seeds, - in fact we have to sow seeds for something to happen - even the most insignificant acts of speaking about Jesus in our lives or doing things in his name, for example, or meeting here and acting as Christ to one another and towards anyone we meet, - these little seeds are something God may choose to grow his Kingdom without us knowing or understanding or making it happen.

Jesus may also have had in mind those of his day who were, even then trying to force the growth of the Kingdom, the Pharisees who thought they could get it to come by getting people to obey the Torah, and the zealots who thought they could impose it by violence. Who can we recognize today who think they have methods of forcing or manipulating the Kingdom to grow, who think they have the keys which achieve Kingdom growth?

And then at the end of that growth he goes in with the sickle – the Biblical symbol of the harvest judgment on the day of the Lord. The sickle is mentioned as such in Revelation 14 several times but also his hearers would be very familiar with this from Joel 3:13. When an ancient farmer went to harvest his field he didn't know what he was going to find. In those days with just scattering seed by hand and not having any weed control it was only when the grain was harvested and the weeds discarded that the amount of grain that had actually grown became clear. Harvest was the time of revelation of what the growth was like and one could then judge whether the yield was good or poor. So it is with the Kingdom of God – that on the day of the Lord, the day of harvest, it will be revealed what the fruit of the growth is, who has responded to Jesus and become an insider or not.

The second parable is not quite so normal a story. It has a few surprises. First of all there is the exaggeration – the mustard seed (black mustard , brassica nigra) is not the smallest of seeds and the shrub – actually the word used more often referred to vegetable plants – the mustard plant was certainly not a particularly impressive size. Secondly people of that day would not have sown mustard as it was generally a weed that would take over ground that wasn't cared for and produce a low cover that yes, birds could nest in the shade of, once it really got away in a field. The mustard plant had a few uses but certainly wasn't considered a desirable crop or cover plant. This story would have caused those listening but not wanting hear to snort with amusement before they turned away.

The point of this comparison is about the magnitude of the growth of something that starts very small. Jesus was beginning this ministry in a backwater of a small country with a handful of men of mixed backgrounds yet his Kingdom would grow to a surprising extent and provide life to sustain many. The birds of the air nesting in its shade would have brought to mind Ezekiel except that the trees there were cedars of Lebanon – far more likely for the birds to nest in.

References in the OT to the birds of the air referred to the Gentiles drawn into the life of the Kingdom of God.

So both these parables of the Kingdom point to God's action in growing his Kingdom from small insignificant beginnings into something of great significance, without our understanding and without our involvement in that growth. What is required from us is our response to these stories – not an intellectual “now I know what this is about” or an activist “I can make this happen, or make it better” but a humble acceptance of Jesus being the bringer of the Kingdom, becoming a faithful learner from him and turning away from all that is not of God. And then living in the expectation that he will bring the growth of his Kingdom as we faithfully live in his ways. As was brought to us in a prophetic word some time ago – Seek his righteousness and he will build his kingdom. That will be quite an effort enough on our part. And eventually we will be caught up in the judgment of how we have each responded.

So let's stand to proclaim that it is in Christ alone that we have hope of life.