

Parables of Growth

14th June 2015

Sunday after Trinity

There is a story of a parish priest who was out visiting and passed a member of his congregation hard at work in his garden. The priest noticed how well kept the garden was and exclaimed to the gardener,

What a wonderful job you and the Lord are making of this garden!

The gardener stood, up looked a little puzzled and replied,

You should have seen what it was like when the Lord had it all to himself!

I guess the garden would have grown wild and overgrown. The truth is that what human beings contribute most to gardens is pruning, weeding, cutting back. When left to themselves, gardens grow – though we may not like what they grow or where they grow it.

This natural tendency of nature is to flourish and this is what lies behind the two of Jesus' parables we have heard today. But what Jesus draws our attention to is not the power of nature, but what lies behind it – the power and working God himself.

But Jesus not only sees God at work in nature but he sees a kind of parallel between the way that nature works and the way that God works. In fact, the way that nature works is the way that God works. Or, as Jesus so often puts it, 'the kingdom of God is like...' and one of many follow.

Well first of all it is like a field of grain. What Jesus draws our attention to is how it seems to grow of its own accord until, suddenly, it is ready for harvest. There is a well-known hymn that picks up on these words:

First the grain and then the ear
Then the full corn shall appear

The writer of the hymn has no doubt that this is meant to be a picture of personal spiritual growth for he continues:

Grant O Harvest Lord that we
Wholesome grain and pure may be.

It is not a harvest hymn at all, in the literal sense: it is a hymn about the last judgment. If the idea of judgment sounds scary, it is not meant to be. In the literal sense, judgment is about justice. It is the day when all who have done wrong will answer for it. And that is Good News! I, too, will stand before God and I will see myself as I truly am. That means I will be stripped of all my illusions of grandeur, my self-importance, my self-righteousness. And that will be hard. Hard for me. Hard for you.

But I will also lose all my fears, my anxieties, and my hang-ups because I will see God face to face and know first hand how much he loves me. And the image is that I will be the full corn, the ripened ear of grain, ready for harvest. And that will be a matter of joy for me, for you. No-one should ever be afraid to meet God face to face. No-one should ever be afraid of death.

But we should note how it all happens: it is God's work. It is God who makes the grain ready for harvest. It is God who makes you and me ready to meet him face to face. This is the point that St Paul makes when he writes to the Church in Corinth.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away;
see, everything has become new.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

But the new creation is not forced upon us. We are not made 'in Christ' against our will. We consent. And so here the parable is not exact. God works in us; but only become at some stage we have let him in.

And perhaps the second parable, of the mustard seed, is saying the same thing. The mustard is not the smallest seed in Palestine – the Cypress seed is smaller. But just as we might say, as a matter of habit, 'as quiet

as a mouse' or 'as strong as an ox', so people of Jesus' time would say 'as small as a mustard seed.' But mustard seeds grew into big trees and it was a common sight, in the Palestine of Jesus' time, for the mustard tree to be full of birds. For they loved the seeds and came to eat them.

The parable, then, is an encouragement to us all that even the greatest achievements have small beginnings. Or to put it the other way, the smallest beginning can lead to greatest achievements: mighty oaks from little acorns grow. Jesus applies this quite specifically to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever God will achieve will begin in a very small way. Often it will begin quite specifically with a human being saying 'yes' to God. The very first 'yes' will simply be to the question

Will you follow me?

The gospel is full of questions like that. Or rather commands, which, in general are obeyed. Jesus sees Peter and Andrew fishing and calls them with the words

Come after me and I will make you
fishers of people

Matthew 4:19

He calls James and John when they are mending their nets; he calls Matthew sitting in the tax office. He stopped Saul in his tracks on the road to Damascus to persecute even more Christians. And he calls, has called, will call you and me.

And God will have more questions. For a young woman called Mary the question was whether she would be mother to the Father's only Son.

None of us will receive that question. But there will be many other questions, each one different for each of us. And whenever we say 'yes' we plant a mustard seed. We put another building bloc in the Kingdom of God.

But the reading from Ezekiel reminds us that there is a social, a political element to the Kingdom of God. It is not just about my own personal relationship with God. His vision of a great tree providing shelter to the

birds may well have inspired Jesus' parable. But it is clear from the context that this is a vision for Israel as a nation, the Jewish people as a whole. God will make the nation prosper in order that it may provide hospitality to every kind of bird and winged creatures of every kind. And what is more there will be a kind of egalitarian social justice:

All the trees of the forest will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.

Ezekiel 17:24 (NIV)

It is a theme common to many biblical writers. That the mighty will be brought low and the poor vindicated. In fact these are the sentiments expressed by the Blessed Virgin Mary after she has agreed to be the mother of Jesus:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:52-53

It is a powerful vision for the church and the nation. And just as God requires a response from us as individuals, so he requires a response from us as Christians, as the people of Bradford and as the people of this country.

We, too, must say 'yes' to God.

N Clews

17th June 2018
St James Bolton