

'From little things big things grow'

Mark 4.26-34

Mark chapter 4 is full of stories – parables to be precise. All told by Jesus, and all seeking to convey something of the nature of 'the Kingdom of God'. To tell a parable is to put one thing beside another for comparison, and this method of teaching is brilliant for evoking reflection and deeper understanding. It's Jesus' main method of teaching, and Mark 4 contains four of his most famous parables. Interestingly, three of them, draw on the metaphor of seed.

The chapter opens with the parable of the sower, seed, and four types of soil. It's by far the longest of the parables in this block. The two we just heard, seem related, and perhaps that's their purpose here, to augment what's already been offered. If the parable of the sower focusses on receptivity, on the quality and condition of the ground, the willingness of people to take in the seed (the message of God's kingdom), these next parables focus on a fundamental dynamic of the kingdom, namely, its proclivity to grow.

'This is what the kingdom of God is like', Jesus says, setting up the comparison, OR, more literally, 'The kingdom of God is as if...' As if, what? As if a person 'scatters seed on the ground' – good ground we must assume, fertile, receptive ground – 'and night and day, while s/he sleeps and rises, the seed sprouts and grows, s/he knows not how'. 'The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once, s/he goes in with the sickle, because the harvest has come.' It's such a simple story, and so vivid, even for those who haven't grown up on a farm or tending a veggie patch. We can picture it happening, the miracle of germination and growth.

The key point of this parable is captured in that little phrase ‘s/he does not know how’. It reminds us that growth is a mystery; it happens ‘of its own accord’, ‘naturally’. The farmer has a hand in sowing and harvesting, s/he may do some watering and weeding along the way. All of this encourages growth, but the growth itself is beyond her. That’s due to an energy, a quality inherent in each seed. So too, this energetic quality is of the essence of God’s way of working in the world.

And, related to this is a sense of order and movement; of purpose. This growth has a trajectory, a *telos* – ‘*first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head*’. In other words, it’s growth as ripening over time; growth in the direction of fecundity, maturation, fulfilment, realisation. This theme is picked up again in the parable of the mustard seed. ‘*With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?*’ (Jesus asks). ‘*It is like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*’

Technically, the mustard seed isn’t the smallest seed on the earth. Jesus is speaking proverbially. The point he’s highlighting is the transformation that occurs over time and the disproportionate impact of the seed of the kingdom. Despite its small and seemingly insignificant size, this seed, when sown, grows... and grows... and grows into a sizeable shrub with spreading branches and shade for the birds – it’s a beautiful and hospitable image. And that’s how God works, Jesus is saying – from little things, big things grow.

Commentators suggest that these parables are best read in two ‘time zones’. First came their initial telling by Jesus; as part of his tireless attempt

to communicate what God's life is like and what happens when it takes root in a human life. Then came the retelling of these stories in the context of Mark's own community – which was small, probably persecuted, and presumably reassured to think that its smallness and the slowness of its mission were not signs of failure. For in these parables, they hear that their calling is simply to let God grow within them, and then to share the seed and hospitality of the kingdom as they can. How their growing, ripening and sowing might enable life to spring up around them and within others – well, that's not necessarily up to them to determine. There are forces other than their efforts involved here, including the irrepressible fecundity of the seed.

To Sarah...

Well, as with all the parables, there's great depth of meaning in what appears simple. And I think there are fundamental insights here about how we might understand God at work in the world and in us – insights that are significant for the maturing of faith and prayer.

We've already seen that in these stories of seeds, Jesus speaks of the work of God in terms of natural processes. This suggests something about how God characteristically acts – and it's 'not with thunderclaps; not with immensely dramatic and instantaneous interventions' (Rowan Williams). It's true that dramatic things may happen. But characteristically, God acts from the 'within' of things, 'subtly, slowly, from the very depth of being'.

Sometimes we have experiences where God's presence or prompting does seem more obvious than others – as if there has been an intervention from beyond. This isn't because God has suddenly shown up to interrupt the natural state of world. It's that something in us, in the world is more transparent or available to God's ever-steady presence. This profoundly affects how we understand the work of prayer. It's not trying to get God to

‘do’ things, but becoming ourselves more receptive and responsive to God’s will and grace.

If this is right, if God characteristically works from the ‘within’ of being, then two things follow. First, we should expect to be able to recognise God in the world, and in the patterns and possibilities of the world God has made. And this is what the parables point to. Jesus is saying, you know more than you realize about God. The trouble is that you look and look, and you don’t see; you listen, but you don’t understand. The kingdom of God works like this – it shares itself, it wants to take root, to grow and fruit, to generate more and more life. Look, here it is among you! Don’t you perceive it? And yet on the other hand, although it’s clearly reflected in the world, the kingdom is not *reducible* to the world’s life, not identical with it.

A sceptic might argue that if God is supposedly at work in the world largely from ‘within’, through the processes of the world ... then do we need to introduce God at all? Why not just say: this is how the world works? What do we add to our understanding, how does bringing God into the picture add anything to what’s possible?

This is where the genius of the seed analogy becomes clearer. Jesus teaches that God communicates, God’s word comes to us, like seed. And a seed needs to be sown if it’s to become apparent what it is, what it means. ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground ... and the seed would sprout and grow’. The inference is that you cannot know God, you cannot perceive the reality and effect of God’s presence, unless God has begun to grow in you; unless you’re beginning to be grafted into God. There’s no way the reality of God can be proved to you, from outside of relationship, from a ‘safe’ distance. The sceptic may ask, but how can this reality you call ‘God’ take root in us? How does it happen? And the

answer is, we never really know, 'we know not how'. But the sign that it is happening is growth, fruitfulness, generosity and generativity. The transformation from self-centredness to self-giving and service – this is the sign the kingdom is at work, growing within.

So with extraordinary economy (so few words, so much meaning), these parables show what God is like, how God characteristically acts – subtly, slowly, from the within of things. They teach that the 'life' of God can take root and grow in ours; it can transform us and through us begin to transform the world around us. Jesus is suggesting that God is healing the world's wounds, forgiving and liberating failures and hurts, 'by being with and in the processes of the world', (with and in us), making of us a place where love blossoms and expands.

Listen again to what he says: 'the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet 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'. The 4th century theologian Gregory of Nyssa defined sin as 'the failure to grow'. Let us pray, then, for God's growth in us.