

Mark 4:26-34

God's reign is hidden

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm always a bit hesitant to preach on any of the agriculturally themed parables to a farming community. It's not my area of expertise, and I'm sure I could manage to make a mess of the whole thing. But I'm going to do it anyway, and my excuse today is that the parables in our gospel reading are some of the most obscure in the scriptures, so I'm probably going to make a mess of it regardless.

Unlike the parable of the sower earlier in this same chapter of Mark's gospel, the two parables in today's reading are quite mysterious. Like all parables, they're an earthly story about a heavenly reality. The unseen things of God's creation are explained and talked about using the seen things of God's creation. Sometimes parables simple enough that the parallels are obvious, and the easy to understand things of this world do show us the not so easy to understand things of the spiritual realm. But they're not all intended to be a one-to-one metaphor. Though they are all intended to call us into the deeper reality that is God's kingdom.

The first thing we see today is that the kingdom may be hidden from those unaware of its presence. But even in that hiddenness, there is still growth. Growth that will one day result in a harvest. It's quite possible that Jesus was making a point to those amongst his followers who wanted to hurry along the coming of the kingdom by taking up arms against the Romans. But the coming of God's kingdom, God's rule and reign, is like the seed that grows all by itself. The farmer doesn't make it grow, and can't bring it to harvest any quicker. The one who sows the seed in this first parable doesn't even water or weed. He just sows and then sleeps and rises night and day, and the earth produces of itself.

Likewise, we can't force God's kingdom to grow, nor can we determine when God will bring all things to their fulfilment. The kingdom grows organically. And inevitably, as day follows night, God's hidden, mysterious work in the world and in us will be fruitful. And all that will happen in the fullness of time.

This also means that if we're living under God's reign, then we shouldn't necessarily expect a world where everything is planned and logical and predictable. The kingdom of heaven is one filled with mysteries and surprises into which a sovereign God invites us. Often the right response to the mysteries of the kingdom is simply to marvel at God's grace and mercy and wisdom and power. God is almighty, and yet acts through hidden and weak things. God is righteous and just, but also is patient and full of mercy.

This passage as a whole emphasises the hiddenness and smallness of the quiet beginnings of God's kingdom. God doesn't just give everyone a road to Damascus experience like St Paul, coming in a blinding light and giving them no choice but to believe. And here, Jesus doesn't use an amazingly large object to make the point. He uses the image of a bird nesting in the shade of a shrub. Jesus could have used the image from the Ezekiel reading. God's reign is like the towering cedars of Lebanon. You can't miss it; everyone can see it and be impressed.

Instead, we have something much more ordinary. The mustard plant is not very big or noticeable. This is not the kind of crop most people would sow. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific; it could pop up almost anywhere. And it can grow well, and slowly spread, and over time transform a whole landscape. Some might consider it a nuisance, a weed even. But it still serves its purpose. Left unchecked it will get into everything. It will bring life and colour even to the most desolate places. This is an image of gentle expansion, but not of overwhelming, unmissable glory.

This is mirrored in how Jesus approached his earthly ministry. The very use of parables in his teaching meant that the kingdom would not always be immediately apparent to his listeners. Mark says after these two parables that Jesus always used parables for the crowds, and only explained things later to the disciples. There's something about the life of repentance and faith to which Jesus calls us, that it cannot easily be face straight on. It comes to us hidden in parables, hidden in the love of our neighbour, hidden in the waters of baptism, hidden in the bread and wine of holy communion. This is where the gentle expansion of the kingdom of God is found.

Although we might like to see the full power of God at work, bringing wholesale change to the way this world operates, I think it's for our benefit that that's not how it works. We couldn't cope with the overwhelming majesty and glory of an almighty God. The fullness of the kingdom of heaven would be too much for us to bear. And so, Jesus brings it to us in hidden ways. And Jesus teaches us about it in hidden ways.

When Jesus told the parable of the sower, and the seed that seems to be wasted on the rocky ground and the path and among the thorns, the disciples were confused. And Jesus' response is that they have been given the secret to the kingdom of God, but everyone else only gets it in parables. This is the very nature of the message of the kingdom and demands a special gift of hearing that enables us to comprehend its message in our lives. St Paul puts it this way in the letter to the church in Corinth:

The person without the Holy Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV)

The kingdom of heaven simply cannot be understood in the same terms as any earthly kingdom. It is a spiritual kingdom, and can only be discerned by those who have the Spirit. It doesn't look like it has any power and authority when looking at it with earthly eyes. But it is there, and it is growing. Even while we sleep, God's kingdom is growing. Even if we can't see it in our little corner of the world, God's kingdom is growing.

God still reigns. Jesus is still risen from the dead. And we live in hope, knowing that in the fullness of time God will restore all things, we will live fully in the new creation, in the peace of God's presence for all eternity. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.