

**13/06/2021 Mark 4:26-34 Sermon Third Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Fraser**

In 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 we read these words from St Paul:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

St Paul was someone who, from a human point of view,
Could have made a great boast about his effectiveness in promoting the Gospel.
He also could have pointed to his authenticity and sincerity
In his service as an apostle: he had suffered much in his calling.
But St Paul knew that although he had a calling from God
And that he had the duty to live faithfully according to his calling
Only God could make his service fruitful: only God could give the growth.

Today I'm proclaiming good news from God's word:

We are free to drop the burden of thinking that we can convert people
Or that we can, by our own insight, or persuasiveness, or winsomeness,
Bring people to life with faith in God, or grow them in the life of love.

Only God's Spirit-filled word can do this.

So, we are free to drop the burden of thinking that we have to be God.
Instead, we can live joyfully in the callings that God has given us,
Trusting that when we live faithfully as disciples of Jesus
God's word will do its work not only in our lives,
And the lives of those around us,
But also in our world in ways that go beyond our capacity to imagine.

This is how today's reading begins:

[Jesus] also said,

Let's stop right there.

Evidently we are in the middle of a story here.

Jesus has been teaching the crowds in parables

In fact earlier he has given the parable of the Sower:

You remember: the Sower scatters the seed far and wide

And the seed falls on different types of ground.

Some of the seed is snatched up by the birds,

Some falls on rocky, unproductive ground,

Some is choked of by thorns as it grows,

But some of the seed grows giving a bountiful harvest.

Now privately, to his disciples alone,
Jesus reveals the mystery of the kingdom of heaven to his disciples
As he explains the parables to them:
In this case especially explaining that the Sower sows the word.

Just a note here:

The Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke in particular
Make it clear that Jesus taught the crowds only in parables,
And that what he said to the crowds remained obscure to them.

This is what we read earlier in the chapter:

And [Jesus] said to [his disciples], ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

**“they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.” ’**

And at the end of today’s reading we hear these words:

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

This can seem counterintuitive to us:

Surely Jesus would want to get his message out as much as possible
And as clearly as possible...

So why employ a strategy of communication
That leads to the crowd’s failure to comprehend,
And failure to turn to God in trust?

Here’s one way to think about it:

To receive Jesus’ teaching with understanding,
We first need to be called by Jesus, to be his disciples.

We need to be in relationship with him;
To know not just what he says, *but who he is*.

We here, today, are receiving the parables as disciples of Jesus:

As people who have been called by him in Holy Baptism;

Who receive his teaching, especially as we meet together Sunday by Sunday.

We receive his word trusting that he is not only a sage or a prophet

Or a worker of wonders

But our Lord and Saviour, who atoned for our sins
And who reconciles us to the Father.
More than this: who gathers us together as his brothers and sisters
So that we hear his word *together*.

So, let's together hear his word together:

[Jesus] also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if

Let's, again, stop there.

The kingdom of God is as if...

Jesus is giving us these parables so that we have an understanding

Of what God's kingdom is like:

Of what it is like in that realm where God is in charge

Where God's will is done.

Where we can see the true ruler, God at work.

So, this is not about earthly power

Which works according to its own set of rules.

This parable is about God's reign in our world:

[Jesus] also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know 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 he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

Notice here that the Sower does to something:

He does his job of scattering the seed: he acts trusting that a harvest will come.

This puts us in mind of the parable that Jesus has just told.

But what does the Sower do after scattering the seed?

The Sower sleeps and rises night and day.

It's significant that sleep is the first thing mentioned:

God's action starts when humans are resting:

But there is also a rhythm here that suggests normal human activity

Sleeping and rising night and day:

Going about life doing what we have been called by God to do

While God goes about his work of growing the seed.

Notice also that Jesus specifies the process of growth in the parable:

first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

The growth happens in God's time: it cannot be rushed by human action:

All that can be done is to wait until the harvest is ready.

But, as Jesus says, when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

The calling is then to harvest what God has grown.

Jesus then gives another parable about God's reign, about God's rule:

[Jesus] also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 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 the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

Now it helps in hearing these words to know the Old Testament background.

Jesus both alludes to and quotes from Ezekiel

From passages about the kingdom that God will grow,

A Davidic kingdom, that will draw in the nations of the earth.

In Ezekiel the plant is a cedar: in the ancient world

A widely understood symbol of empire and power.

In Ezekiel it is clear that the birds of the air

Are the tribes, languages, and nations of people.

Here in the Gospel Jesus evidently takes this imagery

And, with some evident hyperbole, adapts it for his own use.

He likens the kingdom of God not to a cedar

But to a mustard seed, something small and seemingly insignificant

But something that grows, and provides shade for the birds of the air.

It's hard not to understand that Jesus here is talking, ultimately,

About himself: that he, as insignificant as he seems,

Will fall into the ground of death, and in his resurrection,

Will grow into the place of refuge and rest for people

Of all nations, tribes, and tongues.

Again, the kingdom of God does not work according to human rules:

God's word has power, God gives the growth,

We come into *his* work, and enjoy the rest that *he* gives.

In closing, let's hear again from St Paul:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

It is God who gives the growth.

While God gives the growth, we have our callings.

Think about where God has placed you, and what God is calling you to do:

When you work faithfully, knowing that God sees your service,

You will have reward from God.

And in God's kingdom changing a nappy, teaching students, mowing a lawn,

Wiring a house, caring for an aged relative, writing to a politician,

All these can be filled with spiritual significance:

They can be the sleeping and rising night and day of the Christian life.

We can also know that as God gives us opportunity to speak his word

That his word will do its work.

And it's good for us to be prepared to speak his word

As God gives us opportunity.

This is how St Peter puts it: **Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.**

Well, may God give us the wisdom to live this way:

To drop the burden of thinking that we can do what only God can do,

That we can convert people: it is God's Spirit-filled word that does this.

May God give us strength to live faithfully in the callings that he has given us,

To speak hopefully as God gives us the opportunity,

And to live in maturing love for each other as disciples of the Lord Jesus,

Who have had the mysteries of God's kingdom revealed to us.