

Mark 4: 25-32

Pymble 17.6.18

Those darn weeds!

I'm going to ask you to embrace a paradox today –
to extend your trust in God to accept 2 rather contradictory positions.
We'll come to that paradox shortly but in order to appreciate it
we will need to sit for a moment with Jesus' 2 parables
that are our focus today from Mark's gospel.

Jesus' first parable about the seed that grows in secret
is so straightforward some even call it boring.
And those that label it that way,
suggest its over-simplicity is the reason that Matthew and Luke
leave it out altogether despite using so much other Markan material.
Even so, let us try to hear it for what it says,
for *simple* doesn't always mean *easily understood*.

A man plants a seed, and then doesn't seem to do much else.
He sleeps and rises, and the seed grows by itself...
First the stalk coming out of the ground,
then the head forms, before the full grain in the head.
He doesn't really understand the process – it just happens –
and then harvest time arrives.

I got to know plenty of wheat and rice farmers in Griffith
and this relaxed attitude is nothing like them.
Sometimes their wives would laugh
because their husbands often said they were going out
to check the crop – as if it was going somewhere!
Most farmers do fuss over their crop;
they measure pH levels in the soil, check the water levels (for rice),
ensure there are no pests and perform plenty of other regular tasks.
And that is just being a good farmer today.
But for all intents and purposes,
the crop grows *by itself*, as the text says,
from the word we get *automatic*.
It just happens without much input from us.
These days we can describe the biological processes –
germination, photosynthesis and cell multiplication –
but it doesn't really take away from the mystery – the simple wonder –
of a crop coming forth from seed.

And Jesus teases that there is something

of the Kingdom of God in this.

That within the seed –
be it planted in the heart of an individual,
the soul of a church, or the heart of a nation –
within that seed is all that is needed to bring it to fruitfulness.
The growth might be imperceptible at times
but that doesn't negate the fact of the coming crop.

Like the modern farmer, we could get anxious
at whether our endeavours will amount to anything;
we may be impatient and desire instant results,
but to help us there are stages along the way
to point to the final outcome.

Blades that shoot up through the ground surface
or the emergence of the head on the stalk
give us encouragement that the grain and harvest will come.

In individuals those shoots may equate to questions
that begin a process of spiritual discovery,
or a heightened awareness of God's reality,
or even a sense that God is calling to them.

In a community or society those stages may be things like
shifting attitudes or public calls for justice.

They could be seen in more compassionate attitudes to groups in need
and even changing policies to reflect those demands.

But still we wait for the fuller harvest of God's kingdom.

Now we are often taught, and rightly so,
to look for the sting in the tail of a parable –
the shock detail that makes us think twice
or to see in a fresh way.

There is not much of a sting in this parable.

Unless it is the *automatic* nature of the growth,
and the *inevitability* of the crop
especially for those of us who feel the coming of the kingdom
relies on our effort and activity alone.

Perhaps the encouragement here
is to be more like the farmer who sleeps, peaceful and relaxed
in the knowledge that the seed will do its job.

The second parable of this pair similarly speaks of growth –
from something tiny to something large and significant.

The mustard seed was something proverbially small –
a tiny round seed.

Here's a photo of some seeds in a hand with some dried seed cases,
and here are about a dozen on a hand.



And here is a fully grown mustard bush.



There's no need to be anxious about whether it is a shrub or a tree or whether it's the largest shrub – the point is the comparison. The kingdom will grow from something small and insignificant to something large and obvious.

And in *this* parable there is an obvious sting in the tail. Because of all the plants and trees to which to liken the kingdom, Jesus chooses a mustard bush. You see, the mustard bush was almost a weed; it grew wild, and let's face it, it is not particularly attractive. Yet it is hardy, multiplies readily, has some medicinal uses, and, as Jesus says, creatures can take refuge in its branches.

Now this modern day comparison isn't right in every way, but I'm thinking of Patterson's Curse in Australia. Obviously the comparison fails in the sense that Patterson's Curse is a straight out noxious weed but in terms of its spreadability, its hardiness, the colour it brings, maybe the responses it engenders –

these aspects of it work well as a modern equivalent to mustard bushes.



Jesus may have even had his tongue in his cheek as he told this parable, for Ezekiel 17 has a very similar allegory that would have been widely known. In this text, the Lord takes a sprig from a tree and plants and grows something that the birds could shelter in. Listen to the similarities...

*On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce branches and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.*

Ezekiel 17: 23

Speaking here of a new Israel or perhaps the Messiah, the image is of a giant cedar of Lebanon – a grand tree, with a fine reputation for building across the ancient world. By contrast Jesus speaks of the kingdom as a mustard bush – far more ordinary; much less noble, yet useful in its own way.

So together, the 2 parables enlighten us.
Firstly, God's kingdom *will indeed* grow and become fruitful,
and secondly, we hear something of the characteristics of the kingdom.
And we might be a bit shocked at the characteristics
because they aren't all positive.
Common. Weed-like. Perhaps a bit of a nuisance to some.
And yet transformative, adaptable, healing
and offering refuge for those in danger.

I invite you to sit with these parables through the week
and to reflect on the links between God's realm and these images.
I think this is how parables are meant to work.
Simple, memorable stories which sit with us
and allow us to come back to them over time.
And as we reflect, we may want to ask,
what exactly is Jesus pointing to in these parables?
what *is* the kingdom of God to which he alludes?
Is it the movement he began with his ministry?
Is it the early church, growing from small beginnings?
Is it the movement of God in the human heart?
Is it the positive changes we sometimes see,
or would like to see across cultures or through time?
And I'd say, Yes! Yes to those suggestions, and more.
I don't think we are to reduce the kingdom to one concept or context.

Now to turn to our paradox.
We have almost seen it already.
The strange thing about these parables is,

- that they affirm the certainty of God's work;
- the inevitability of growth;
- the sure development of God's realm from small to large.

And yet, we find these parables
in the midst of a gospel that highlights

- the constant failure of the disciples to "get it";
- the inability of Israel as a whole to welcome Jesus;
- an ending in fear and silence.

The parables seem to contradict the wider narrative of Mark's gospel.
The parables declare, *God will do it;*
God will establish his kingdom,
while the rest of the story of Mark seems to suggest the exact opposite.
Yes, Jesus continues on his healing, overcoming way,
but all around him who *should* understand, fail to do so.
How is that kingdom going to come
if those entrusted with its message fail to understand and stay silent?

It is something of a paradox.

But perhaps there is hope for us even in this paradox.

For both of them are true in our day also.

We are very much aware of the fear and failure
within the modern church.

We know how the Church is largely “on the nose”
for much of the wider community;

we are aware of our shortcomings –

that we don’t always live consistent with our calling.

And yet we can also believe

that God will surely... mysteriously usher in the kingdom;

that God will bring his renewed and reconciled world to fruition.

The 2 seem almost mutually exclusive –

our failures and God’s faithfulness – and yet both are true.

If we are attuned to the media and attentive to the mood of the community,

it is easy to believe the first,

but as we draw close to God,

immerse ourselves in the stories of Scripture

and notice glimpses of the kingdom

shooting up amongst ourselves and in other places,

then it becomes easier to match the pessimism of the first

with the promise of the second.

This is our grounded Christian hope

and I invite you to embrace the paradox.