

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 11 Year B 2021

One of the key ways in which our Lord Christ is presented throughout all the gospels is as teacher. This is no less so in the gospel of Mark, which we pick up once more in an ordered and systematic way now that we have ended our long journey through Lent Eastertide and the great festivals over the past month. For Mark, as for Matthew and Luke, much of Jesus' teaching is contained in the parable of Our Lord. Now, we usually understand the parables of Jesus as simple stories, taken from everyday life, to make his teaching easy and accessible. But in chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, it is not as straightforward as that.

In the gospel today, the evangelist Mark appears to be drawing on the much wider sense of the word parable, of not just an illustrative story, but also a puzzle or enigma or riddle. If a parable is just a story well then, that *will* be useful for teaching and learning. But if a puzzle or riddle it can just as well tease or mystify and even alienate. Which is what is at play in the first parable today. And this makes sense when we remember that the central element of Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God. In Jesus' mind, the inbreaking of the rule of God disrupts the order of things. It turns the world upside down. The reordering of our lives under God's rule is never going to be a simple straight forward matter... The parables then, such as what we hear today, always have something of a sharp edge. They are not simple moral lessons. But as such it makes the difficult suggestion that Jesus used parables *not* to make his message clear, but to confuse and ultimately exclude and condemn those that have taken a stand against him. In other words, a certain level of 'insider knowledge' is required to make sense of Jesus' teaching. It cannot all be understood from the outside. Ultimately, it is when one converts, when one is open to the message, receives it in love and faith, and is part of the interpreting community, that truth and insight comes. This in itself is an important insight. We do the gospel no service with a lowest common denominator approach. Sometimes the truth of the gospel is hard, and grows in us only over time.

And so, the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly might at first appear straight forward enough. But is it? *The kingdom of God is as if a man would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would grow and sprout, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain of the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.*

The interesting part of this little story – which makes it both so interesting and challenging - is in what we hear translated as, '*the earth produces of itself.*' 'Of itself' comes from the Greek *automatos* which we would easily enough understand as 'automatic'. A curious word and the only time it occurs in the entire Gospel record, and appears only once elsewhere in the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, when the gates of the prison where Peter was kept swung open 'of itself', *automatos*. In both accounts we have what we might call a case of the 'divine passive': what appears to happen 'automatically' is in fact a result of God's sovereign action.

The idea that seed of the kingdom grows automatically we might not have considered before. How do we make sense of it? There seems to be something of a tension with this idea and others at play in the gospels, that we must proclaim the good news to all nations, that we must co-operate with God's work in the world, that we must strive to build the kingdom, that laborers are needed for the harvest, that there is a great haul of fish to be made, that we are to be salt of the earth, light to world. We could go on.

Well, the parable today, then, gives us a very good example of the importance of the holding the entire scriptural record together, of holding different voices alongside each other. It would be a very strange thing indeed if teaching on the Kingdom as contained in this little parable was all we had to work from. There is of course an enormous body of teaching on this subject, with many approaches and many nuances. But what we hear today we need to take seriously, on its own terms, even as we hold it alongside others. And it poses the question, *does* the seed of kingdom really grow automatically? Does it not in fact need us? Does our response and participation not matter?

It's difficult to answer. But as a starting point the parable suggests that the absence of visible and dramatic signs does not mean the kingdom of God is not at work; it is present and active, producing fruit that *will be* harvested in God's good time. We can oftentimes be impatient with God and the church each other, that it does not function or perform in the way we want, the way we expect, the way that is in accord with our tastes or preferences. And very often we are seduced by the big, the attractive and the successful. And we can be tempted to adjust our life and our faith to be bigger and more attractive and more successful. Anxiety can fester in communities when we feel we are not measuring up to a manmade standard of what the church should be or look like. We can feel the church is failing because it doesn't meet these manmade standards.

How find ourselves today brings this all home to us personally. Without doubt we are not celebrating together in the full way we might like hope. In other words, our plans don't stand for very much! The gospel today should stand as both warning and comfort. Don't substitute the seed of Kingdom's for some imitation! But also, there is a hidden, *modest* dimension to God's kingdom. And that should help alleviate much of the anxiety that is such a feature of the contemporary church. And this directs us to the essential principle that lay at the heart of this parable. And it a principle that the church is practically expert at forgetting or neglecting: that it is *God's* church, the Kingdom of God is *God's* kingdom. Too often we imagine the seed of God's word ought be improved, that we have better ideas than God. And rather than conform the church to the image of God, we conform it to the image of man.

This little parable, then, really directs us to the foundational spiritual discipline, the one from which all others come, the one from which all Christian virtue grows: *humility*. We accept the seed of God's word. We welcome it as a grace, a gift. We accept it on its own terms. What he has revealed to us, *that* is what we allow to shape our hearts and minds. We accept that it *doesn't* need improvement. We actually *don't* have better ideas than God. It does not need to be exchanged for some idolatrous substitute.

By marvelous coincidence – or really, by divine providence – our word 'humility' comes from the latin word *humus* meaning earth. Humus: *earth*, from which all life springs. For those who are gardeners, humus also the components of soil rich in organic matter. For seed to grow well it requires a nutrient rich environment. And so for us. The seed of God's kingdom grows best in hearts and in communities humble before God. Much of the church is obsessed with plans, strategies, and reorganisation. All these things are needed, but the danger is that these things give the false impression that, if only we got our 'strategies' right, then the growth of the kingdom will come. This parable, and the central term *automos*, tells us that this is a lie. The kingdom of God will grow because God is sovereign, and Jesus is Lord, not because of our resolutions or strategies or big ideas. So many of our efforts in the life of faith are directed (or misdirected) toward making a big impression, of conflating the city of God with the city of man, with imagining God's work *depends* on us. Instead, we are invited to see ourselves as nothing but earth. The seed of Christ's gospel has its *own* power. It doesn't need us to add anything or take anything away. When it is welcomed with humility, when God is allowed to be God, it has its own life, its own vitality. Amen.