



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday after Trinity

Proper 6 Year B

2 Corinthians 5. 6-10, 14-17

Mark 4. 26-34

One thing that struck me when I first looked at the readings set for today was that they would be very difficult to comprehend at a first reading or hearing in church. One seems very complex; the other simple, deceptively simple. Needless to say it isn't. What you need to do is to take time, time to think about the meanings, to reflect on them and come to your own conclusion about what Jesus and Paul were saying to their hearers and by extension to us all.

Let's start with Mark's gospel first. What we looked at last week was some of the healings of Jesus, particularly of those who were demon possessed and the opposition this aroused in some people particularly Jewish leaders. Remember we are told that the crowds were so packed together they 'couldn't even eat.' What follows on from this episode is Jesus' teaching of the multitude. Chapter 4 begins:

¹ 'Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. ²He began to teach them many things in parables,'

So Jesus is beside the Sea of Galilee again surrounded by so many folks he has to teach offshore. His first parable in the chapter is the sower, using the analogy of seeds as he does in this week's, followed by the illustration of the lamp on the lampstand. He finishes with these words which precede our reading.

²² 'For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.

²³ Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' ²⁴ And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. ²⁵ For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

Perhaps the key note here is 'Pay attention to what you hear.' Jesus teaches the crowd in parables. In private he explains things to his disciples.

³³ 'With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.'

Why does Jesus do this? To begin with to understand a parable you have to think about it i.e. 'pay attention to what you hear'. Often great writers use metaphors to convey a depth of meaning that they would not be able to express in an ordinary way. To understand a parable takes thought and reflection. Besides there is something of what Jesus says to Nicodemus. 'If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?' Certainly he does not do it to be confusing. Jesus speaks about situations they are familiar with, here as with the sower, he uses an illustration from farming to speak of the kingdom of God.

I had to smile when I read this parable because I had just come back from the allotment having prepared the ground and sowed some radish seed. To say nothing of the hundreds of seeds I have sown in the greenhouse, the vast majority of which are now healthy little plants. How correct the illustration is and any gardener or farmer would recognise it.

²⁶ 'He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.' This story took me right back to the very first lockdown at the beginning of this pandemic. It was a fearful time. One blessing was that it was beautiful weather and people were able to get out into their gardens and enjoy the beauty of nature. I, like thousands of others was determined that our garden should look lovely, the work in itself would be healing and uplifting. The question was how. Nonessential shops were closed and I wasn't going into shops anyway. However every week I take a gardening magazine that gives away free seeds. Some packets were ancient but I decided to sow the seeds I had chosen anyway and give it a go. One pack contained lupin seeds, just a few. I watched them develop and lo and behold they germinated and produced tiny little lupins and another mystery plant. I had no idea what it was so I nurtured it carefully – only to discover much later it had been nothing but a weed! The point is unless you are very clever you can't always identify seeds. Fine if you have the packet that tells you but without it a handful of seeds it is very difficult. I have tried it out on people in sermons. The seeds of the onion family are awful little black things quite undistinguishable.

The point I am getting at is that at the beginning it is hard to imagine what the seed will turn into let alone understand the miracle of new life contained within it. You just have to stick with it and work hard to bring it to fruition.

That is so true on a basic level. Once the seed is in the ground it is watered and tended and you can't see it anymore you just have faith that it will sprout and you will get a good harvest. Jesus begins his series of parables with similar words; 'The kingdom of God is as if...' Jesus is sowing seeds, the seeds of God's word. Looking at this young itinerant preacher from Nazareth it would have been hard to realise that this man was sowing the seed which would bring in God's Kingdom, that here were the beginnings of God's wonderful new creation and that from the seed of his word the world would be changed forever.

The point is Jesus is telling the people they must listen to him; he is giving the good news of the kingdom of God. Not only should they listen but they must accept his words and work, as any farmer has to, to bring them to fruition, to be part of the family of God.

The seed falls into the ground and dies, but if it 'dies' there in the earth is the beginnings of new life, a new life that is so beautiful you couldn't even imagine it just looking at the seed.

The analogy is clear. Jesus brings the seed of God's kingdom. He, like the seed, will fall into the earth and die BUT that death leads directly to the resurrection and that leads to his followers receiving new life in him with God. This is a new way – it is Not what the Jews were expecting, they were expecting the Messiah just to bring the restoration of the fortunes of Israel, by violent means if necessary so the oppressors would be vanquished and Israel would be free. The world was not a part of this plan.

But then look at verse 29 ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

That cherished idea that only Israel would be saved is not Jesus' way; it is not God's way. Jesus' way is radical; it is the way of love, a love so strong it will conquer death and sin. The kingdom of God that begins with Jesus Christ is not simply for the Jews it is for humanity, for all who believe in him. Think back to the reading for Trinity Sunday.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that all who believe in him should not perish but may have eternal life.'

Jesus comes to set the world free from sin and death, that is of course true for all in Israel too, all who believe in him. Sadly so many rejected his word, turned their backs on the seeds of the kingdom Jesus was sowing and rejected their long awaited Messiah.

³⁰ 'He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.'

Jesus uses the analogy of the mustard seed which is different from the mustard we know. We only have to think of the acorn though and the way it turns into a mighty oak. The oak tree nurtures and sustains something like 307 species. It is probably the most valuable of all our trees from that perspective alone.

What Jesus does say is from the tiny seed, apparently insignificant, the huge mustard will grow and birds perch in its branches – our saying would be 'from little acorns mighty oak trees grow.'

There is a real warning included in Jesus' words to those who heard him. Listen to what I say I am telling you of God's promises, my words are God's words. From the seeds I am sowing the world will be changed forever and all who accept them will be loved and protected by God. The sickle will come at the harvest however and all will be judged by Christ. We pray, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. Jesus is quite clear that we will have to answer for what we do.

The good news of Jesus Christ is there for everyone; we have to accept it, nurture it and live our lives to help bring it to fruition. In that way we are helping to bring forth the new creation of God begun in Jesus Christ.

This is a beautiful prayer in the Celtic tradition by John Birch which I took from his site called 'Faith and Worship', Celtic prayers for the Christian year.

'For the promise of harvest

contained within a seed

we thank you.

For the oak tree

within an acorn.

The bread

within a grain.

*The apple
within a pip.
The mystery of nature
gift wrapped
for us to sow
we thank you.'*

The seed of God will come to fruition in lives lived by his kingdom values – lives lived for Christ. Indeed the words of Jesus are waiting for us to sow as we help to bring in his kingdom.

Jesus has said, 'When the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with the sickle because the harvest has come.' St. Paul in verse 10 of our reading is quite clear too, 'For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ so that each might receive recompense for what has been done in the body whether good or bad.'

We know that Jesus the Messiah will come again to judge the earth, this second coming is in part the focus of Advent. During Advent we look for the coming of King Jesus to rule God's perfected creation and to the coming of Jesus as God incarnate at Christmas. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer as we pray, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven' we are asking that God's rule will extend to both his realms at Jesus' second coming. This is the final judgement. Jesus has said earlier in chapter 4 of Mark's gospel.

²² 'For there is nothing hidden, except to be not disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. ²³'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

It is quite clear that is the time when everything will be revealed, when we will all be required to stand before the 'judgement seat of Christ.' A judgement seat in the ancient world was not in a private place it was public, at the centre of government and the governor would sit on it to proclaim judgement; we see this with Paul numerous times when he was required to appear at a judgement seat and Jesus before Pilate too. Our sins cannot be hidden. It is, to quote the hymn, 'The day in whose clear shining light all wrong shall stand revealed, when justice shall be throned in might and ev'ry hurt be healed.'

It is indeed when all will be put right. The idea of final judgement means that whatever we do, be it good or bad we will be judged on. We can hide things from other people, even fool ourselves but not God, he sees and knows all, and 'there is nothing secret but it will be brought to light.' It is a sobering thought but we ignore it at our peril.

Paul makes this the focus at the beginning of the reading (2 Corinthians 5.6). Yes it is true that he would rather be away from the body and with Christ, away from the suffering he endures in this life and be united with Jesus. But he says whether we are in the body here or with Christ our aim must be to live in Christ's way not just because we will be judged on what we do but because we can't claim to be Christians if we hurt other people, if we follow our own way not Christ's. We are justified by faith but that goes hand in hand with living in Christ's way. All who are Christians receive the promises of God and God's Holy and life giving Spirit, that is his gift but our responsibility is to be Christ's people, to be people who walk in the light of God not our own selfish way. What we do is important, it is central to the Gospel of Christ.

God forgives in love, but forgiveness requires us to 'turn from sin and turn to Christ.' If we are hurt by someone hopefully we find it in our heart to forgive as we are taught but we do not condone what is done, neither does God that is why he is the just judge of us all.

We have not seen Christ but as Paul says we 'walk by faith not by sight.' We remember the words of Jesus to Thomas, 'Blessed are those who believe and have not seen.' Our faith relies on trust in God, the God of love and trust in our Lord and Saviour Jesus.

¹⁴'For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.'

It is for that love, Paul says that he can continue and it is so for us. Our faith in Jesus sustains and nurtures us and we trust that as Christians we are part of the family of God and heirs with Christ. Whatever we have to face we do so in the strength of God's Holy Spirit. We are a new creation; nothing is the same once we have accepted Christ as our Saviour. We are his people and he is our God. We do what we do out of love for God and love for others. That should be our maxim. If we honestly know our motivation is for ourselves and we are not showing love to others it's time to pull ourselves up short and remind ourselves of Christ's command, 'Love one another as I have loved you. Jesus' love for humanity was so strong it took him to the cross.

¹⁶ 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!' His love changed the world. We should reflect that love, that's how we help to bring in the new creation. Everything should be new, the new way of Jesus. When we are able to see Jesus in others it makes a difference to how we treat them. We must remember that God poured his love out for us but we have a responsibility to return his love and to give it to others.

Our God transforms the world by the actions of Christians and if we let him into our lives he transforms us. I love this compline prayer so I will end with it.

'Come O Spirit of God, and make within us your dwelling place and home. May our darkness be dispelled by your light and our troubles calmed by your peace. May all evil be redeemed by your love, all pain transformed through the suffering of Christ and all dying glorified in his risen life.' Amen.

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