

Year B Pentecost 4

Ezekiel 17:22-24, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Mark 4: 26-34

This spring was one of the wettest I can remember, making life incredibly difficult for farmers wanting to plant their spring crops, leaving them anxious about what sort of harvest they are going to get – in fact, for those of us who have been watching it, rather like the latest series of Clarkson's Farm, which was filmed two years ago.

Do you know what happens between planting a seed and signs of life emerging a few days or even a few weeks later? Yes, we know it germinates and that warmth and moisture in the ground help speed up growth, but do we understand exactly what happens? We would like to know because then we might have a better chance of ensuring success. If I can do A then B will happen, we all like that sense of control.

Yet in these two short parables, Jesus tells us very clearly that this is not the way God works. In the first parable, the sower plants the seeds and the seeds grow. And what does the farmer do? He sleeps!! What an easy life he has between planting and harvest time. All he seems to have to worry about is eating and sleeping. The parable is very like the more widely known parable of the sower earlier in the chapter where the farmer sows extravagantly, not worrying where the seed will land, and leaves the rest to God. Here, Jesus says, the soil does all the work and the seeds fend for themselves. The earth produces all on its own.

But we know as gardeners that we never let it be as simple as that. We obsess about weeding, watering, thinning, fertilising, netting, pruning and whatever else might need doing. Like gardening, farming is fundamentally active, even if machines do most of the work nowadays.

Yet the farmer in this parable appears to be totally inactive. Yes, the farmer knows the time to plant, but after that it's all a matter of trust, trusting the seeds, the soil and the weather to do their stuff until it's time to harvest. The idea that this very hypothetical farmer is in charge is an illusion. Everything that comes from the land is a result of grace. Because ultimately growth itself is a mystery to farmers and gardeners alike.

In a sense we are living between the planting and the harvest – a time of mystery. When we ‘plant’ our prayers do we have the faith to leave them there and let the soil do its work?

In other words, we shouldn’t look down on those small beginnings that can lead to great things. Just to give you an example, back in the mid-1980s Markie went on one the original Alpha courses, and no-one then ever anticipated it growing into a global phenomenon, not least as it was originally designed for new Christians rather than the evangelistic outreach it has turned into.

In our second parable, someone plants a mustard seed. Apparently, some scholars think Jesus was referring to black mustard – the only problem is that while it grows quite tall it is not really a tree, others think it is more likely to be what is known as the mustard tree, which grows quite a bit bigger and gives off a mustardy smell. The trouble is it spreads like ground elder, which looks innocuous when it first appears, but will eventually crowd out everything around it given half a chance.

In any event people didn’t plant mustard seeds in Jesus’ day because they were basically regarded as a weed. So what does Mark think Jesus is getting at? Well Matthew and Luke place this same parable after the parable of the yeast, so I think Mark, like Matthew and Luke, is again trying to make the point that the kingdom can and will grow from very small beginnings.

To draw a modern parallel – in the 1960s what we now know as the Internet was of interest only to the American military and some academics. Look at it now – the world would grind to a halt without it. Yet 99% of us don’t really have a clue how it works, we just know it does and are grateful for it, just as we are grateful for seeds turning into harvest without being interested in the finer details of how that happens

But Mark seems to be adding the additional point that something that most people would avoid or discard is at the heart of God’s kingdom

It’s almost as if Jesus is saying – be careful what you wish for. You may think you want to see God’s Kingdom, but it’s not going to look like anything you can imagine and you certainly can’t control it, it’s invasive rather like mint or ground elder and however hard you try you can’t eradicate it. It’s disruptive, it welcomes outsiders and outcasts, which is not what farmers and most gardeners want.

In fact, rather like Jesus himself. He was a bit of a mustard tree seed, born into poverty in a backwater on the edges of the Roman empire, yet in 30 years or so his influence was so invasive and pervasive in Galilee and Judea that it had become in the interests of the Romans and for the Jewish authorities for him to die. And his followers were a bit like mustard tree seeds as well, a right ragtag and bobtail collection of misfits.

Unlike us, God's kingdom/garden welcomes the unruly, the unwanted, all the things that our grand plans and efforts don't have room for. God's kingdom is about hospitality and not productivity. In God's kingdom, growth happens at his pace, not ours, and so yes there will be fallow periods. In a sense we have been through a fallow period with interest in God and religion declining over many years in the Western world. Christianity is much stronger outside Western Europe and the United States, yet, particularly in Western Europe, it is clear that it cannot be eradicated.

What these parables seem to be telling us is that God's kingdom grows automatically on its own, regardless of our efforts or good intentions. That doesn't give us a free pass to do nothing, but equally it means we shouldn't be discouraged when all our efforts to be good disciples and faithful disciples seem to be bearing little or no fruit. Often the worst thing we can do is pull something up by its roots to inspect how it's doing. We're better off leaving it and trusting that the kingdom will indeed grow.

Because there is virtually nothing we can do to make the kingdom grow. And that is perhaps a good lesson for us, a reminder that things can come about perfectly well without any help from us. Our life is not about showing what we can do or the length of our to-do list. That's our way of measuring our worth, but it's not God's way.

Our Christian life is about trying to discern what we are called to do, not about rushing around deluding ourselves that the growth of the kingdom depends on what we do. It's about doing what is ours to do and leaving the rest to God.