

Pentecost 3 – Wesley Uniting – 17th June 2012

Theme: “Hiddenness and growth”

Reading: Mark 4:26-34

Introduction

In Mark 4, the evangelist presents parables containing both contemporary and future implications, metaphors for the growth of God's beloved community. The parables include encouragement to action, counsel to patience and hope for the future. They speak of hiddenness and growth and end with the vision of many nations finding shelter in the kingdom of God. This term ‘kingdom of God’ is found 14 times in Mark’s Gospel and is not easily translated into today’s culture. In the first century, power and dominion belonged to Caesar in this region. Early Christians preached that Caesar’s dominion had been overtaken by the dominion of God or ‘the kingdom of God’. This was an in-your-face radical claim defining early Christians by their relationship to the community that followed Jesus, rather than as part of Caesar’s world. This led to the early persecution of the church and the martyrdoms that occurred, as they would not recognise Caesar ‘as Lord and God’. That was reserved for the spiritual realm and demeaned their Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Promised One of the only God.

In today’s reading it assumes the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1- 9 along with the explanation of that parable in verses 14-20. Also Jesus’ initial explanation to the disciples about parables in verses 10-13.

Also we need to remember that to describe the kingdom of God, Jesus often uses parables. Why? As the Greek root (*para ballo*) suggests, parables are stories thrown alongside our lives. In using these short, provocative stories, Jesus recognises the importance of the imagination to look at both ourselves and our relationship with God and God’s kingdom, in a new light. This shift may seem small and insignificant, but here he compares it to a tiny mustard seed that changes miraculously. Likewise the transformation underground is mysterious and amazing.

Middle

Let’s reflect on the parables about seeds set down for today.

Any good gardener knows, you can plant seeds carefully, water and fertilize, but the key transformation occurs underground, beyond our observation and control. The tiny dry seed goes beneath the soil, time passes without observable changes, then suddenly a small green plant emerges. So it is, Mark says, with the reign of God, and so it is, one might add, with faith. Clergy can preach the word, teachers can teach, Christians of all sorts can try to provide good examples of faith and upright conduct. But conversion to Christian faith does not follow neat recipes. It happens indeed, underground, so to speak.

There is the account of what Luther said about the success of his Reformation, that while not politically correct today enforces the power of the parable in today’s reading.

Luther wrote; “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Whittenberg beer with my friends Philip and

Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it. I did nothing; the Word did everything." (Martin Luther, 'The Second Sermon', March 10, 1552)

More than two thousand years after the time of Jesus, it is hard to see clear beginnings of the reign of God. Yet Mark says, hidden transformations are already occurring.

Yet from a tiny seed comes a ten foot high mustard bush.

The imagery of growth from small beginnings is amazing with much going unnoticed.

Today, sometimes we think that the ground of faith looks barren, yet we do not know what is germinating underground, beneath the surface.

An interesting analogy about faith, renewal and hope for the future in today's Gospel.

Everyday Parable

Let me tell you a modern day parable from James Taylor's book 'Everday Parables – Rediscovering God in Common Things' page111.

He writes: "Many people have created parables for me about

onions. An onion's dry, scaly skin can be unattractive, just like some people – until you get to know them better. The layers of an onion can be like experiences we accumulate as we grow as Christians. An onion is like yeast or salt – a little bit goes a long way in flavouring the whole stew. Peeling onions can reduce you to tears – so can some Christians! One woman going through a difficult time in her life decided to spring clean her refrigerator as therapy. It was starting to smell a bit ... At the back of the vegetable drawer she found the culprit – a gooey mess that had once been onions. Holding her nose, she dumped the slimy stuff into the sink and ran water on it to wash it down the drain. To her surprise, in the middle of the rot and decay, three small green shoots were growing. She said, 'God was telling me, in those revolting onions, that there was hope. New life was growing, even where all I could see and smell was death and decay.'"

Conclusion

Jesus speaks to both the disciples and the people in parables to try to give them a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is about. In a sense God is unfathomable, that is why we believe through faith. On the other hand Jesus teaches aspects of God and God's kingdom with picture imagery to help his disciples begin to think about what God's kingdom is like.

We, like the disciples, do not comprehend this but we are given a small insight into that kingdom through the parables.

James Taylor, in his book 'Everyday Parables' challenges us to continue to think of modern day images that may be used as a parable of God to give further insight into the teachings of Jesus. Maybe you can become a parable teller yourself!