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Pentecost 2B Ezekiel 17:22-24, Psalm 20, 2 Cor 5:6-10, 14-17, Mark 4:26-34

The Kingdom of God is surprising

In the name of God, the Holy Trinity Amen

I am an avid consumer of books. I love to read and just recently I discovered Anthony Trollope. What a delight! I have been reading Barchester Towers and here is a quote I want to share with you – it is too delicious not to. Trollope writes:

“There is perhaps no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons”.

I laughed and laughed at that because like all good jokes there is an element of truth in it. Well I do really hope that you do not feel too afflicted and please let me know if you do and what I can do to help make my sermons less of a trial. In the next two weeks we will have two different preachers – Chris will preach next Sunday and Linda will preach the following. It will be lovely to have a change and a different perspective.

We are now in what is called ordinary time and it is a time to look at the major teachings of Jesus. Yet we are presented with a bit of dilemma because the major teachings of Jesus are more often than not presented in the form of a parable. Mark tells us that Jesus did not speak to the disciples except in parables.

And parables as we know can be very difficult to understand. They are like riddles. To understand them you have to have some basic knowledge about the content to begin to understand and even if you do understand they often raise more questions than they answer.

In today's parables Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God, what some would call his central teaching. The Kingdom of God is something Jesus never explicitly explained. His teachings about the Kingdom are by and large part of parables and stories, which is a bit strange when you consider that the idea of the kingdom was so important to him. It is a bit like entrusting the telling of the Ten Commandments to a bloke who tells a good yarn but may not necessarily get the right idea across.

Before I go into today's parable in more detail I want to take a minute to introduce the importance of this aspect of Jesus teaching because the Kingdom of God is something I want to come back to over the next couple of months. In amongst everything else we talk about and do in church we often forget the centrality of

this one idea in Jesus ministry. The Kingdom of God was the subject of Christ's first sermon. The very first thing Jesus says in Marks gospel (Mark 1:14) is *"The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news"*. It was the topic that he focused his teaching on during his last 40 days on earth. Luke writes *"After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God"* (Acts 1:3). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said the kingdom of God was the first thing we should seek and everything else will follow (Mt 6:33). The coming of the Kingdom is the first thing we pray for in the prayer Jesus taught his followers – *"Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your Kingdom come"*. And at the end of Acts we hear that Paul, the great exponent of the Gospel quote *"boldly and without hindrance preached the Kingdom of God"*.

A moment ago I suggested a way to look at a parable is to think of it as a "riddle." The parable of the mustard seed is a humorous riddle if not an outright joke about the Kingdom of God. Like some jokes though you have to be in the know. Like this one - What's the definition of a minor second? Two viola players playing in unison. Get it? Later let me know who did get it. In the case of the parable of the mustard seed to really get it you probably need to be a 1st century Jew and there.

It helps to read Ezekiel 17 only minutes before, but we still tend to listen to scripture with our 'serious ears' on, so we probably miss the rather burlesque and outrageous element of Jesus teaching. Jesus changes Ezekiel's metaphor for the kingdom of God from the mighty cedar tree to that greatest of all shrubs! Not only that this mustard plant Jesus is talking about is a weed. For a 1st century Palestinian the mustard plant was a farmer's nightmare.

Jesus is talking about purposely sowing a weed into the garden or field. My mother-in-law is a keen gardener. She tends and loves the garden and is absolutely vigilant about getting rid of weeds. It would be an absolutely shocking thing if she actually went and planted weeds.

Not only is this idea of Jesus outrageous and funny it is very subversive. The prevailing notion of the time was that one day the nation of Israel would be mighty and strong, like the majestic cedar tree. It is an image of power, strength and might.

The picture Jesus puts in its place is of the mustard bush, a weed, yet offering cover and protection to birds and animals. It is a joke, of course, with a hidden and serious message behind it. Parables are about everything from seeds and shrubs to lost coins and wasted money. They are about ordinary things but ordinary things that according to Jesus are the means to growth and grace. They are about the kingdom

within.

The kingdom is the key. Jesus does not say for instance that we ourselves are like the mustard seed, which though small “grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.” It is rather the kingdom working within us that is the source of all we can become. And to that there is no spiritual limit. The Kingdom cannot be manipulated and controlled by human beings. Like a weed it will come back and spring up no matter what measures we take. It cannot be confined to the church and its ministers and people. The Kingdom is a surprising thing, like a small weed, in a grand garden, perhaps a new idea, a new direction in a room full of conviction and surety.

As I was reflecting on this idea of weeds I wondered about the church and the decisions it makes. The directions it develops. So often the church spends a lot of time weeding out what it believes are the wrong teachings and new ideas yet time and again if they are from God they do prevail. The Kingdom is at hand, Jesus tells us in the Gospels, but we cannot grab hold of it and own it as our own. We cannot control how Gods Kingdom will develop. It is not for sale at any price.

And the meaning of the kingdom is found within each of us as well. Few of us are great and mighty by the world’s standards nor ever will be. Yet none of this matters in the life of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is of a different order entirely. The effect of the kingdom at work in our lives will never be measured in dollars or popularity. We will never know the good we have done with simple acts of kindness and love. Those small deeds of love and concern are like small seeds that can grow and bring goodness. The parable of the mustard seed is like the parable of our lives. The kingdom is at work in the smallest cell of our body and every tiny breath of our spirit.

In modern physics there is an idea that everything is connected from the smallest sub atomic particle to the largest star. Everything in the universe subtly or not affects everything else. What we think of as small and insignificant is an important and critical component of the whole.

David and I are into social justice activism and David particularly will go to protest marches and write letters to politicians and organizations. I sometimes wonder whether all our efforts make any difference. As I look around does anything seem to have changed much? Can we in fact a make a difference in the face of the powerful and strong?

The mustard seed parable says we do have the potential to make a difference – we may not see it, it might be hidden, what we do might look like weeds in an ordered garden. What we do may be mown into the earth,

weeded out but the parable tells us that if it is of the Kingdom of God it will flourish in Gods time.

This is a hope difficult to maintain in the face of so much that is obviously wrong in our world. Yet God does not call us to succeed, only to be faithful - to be faithful planters and tenders of the Kingdom. May the Kingdom within bring forth weeds of grace and love and truth.

And one final joke (or maybe three):

Why do violists stand for long periods outside people's houses?

They can't find the key and they don't know when to come in.

Why do violists smile when they play?

Because ignorance is bliss and what they don't know can't hurt them.

How do you stop an elephant from passing through the eye of a needle?

Tie a knot in its tail.

Amen