
From Seed to Kingdom

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 16 June 2024

Ezekiel 17:22-24 • 2 Corinthians 5:6-10,14-17 • Mark 4:26-34



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Jesus' message to his listeners from today's Gospel is typical of his teaching. he is speaking about the Kingdom of God, trying to prepare the disciples for the times to come. Jesus knows that he will not always be with them, and it is his task to teach them what they need to know to help to carry out God's will for the world. They will, in time, have the Holy Spirit to guide them, but Jesus must give them a basic understanding of God's world and their place in it.

It is also typical because it uses the experiences of the disciples. They lived in a farming society, and images of seeds and plants would resonate with them. Likewise, Jesus often spoke of sheep, as when he identified himself as the Good Shepherd. The people understood these things, and the message came across to them.

Not that the message always did come across: Mark tells us that when Jesus “was alone with his disciples, he would explain everything to them” (4:34). It does not appear that he always did that, or even that his explanations were always clear to them. But Jesus, like any good teacher, left something for the disciples to figure out on their own, as the teaching would then remain with them. That reminds me of some of my high school math textbooks, when the text included an example of a problem, but only went so far, ending with the cryptic message that “the proof is left to the student in an exercise.” Oh, thanks a lot!

Jesus also used exaggeration at times, as we have noticed before. Is the mustard seed truly the smallest of all seeds, and does it grow into the largest of all plants? No matter. The image is meaningful as a comparison to the Kingdom of God, which starts with one person and comes to involve all the world. That one person is Jesus, but God’s plan involves us all. This new faith started in Jerusalem and proceeded throughout the world, carried initially by certain key people: Paul, Barnabas, Peter and a few others. They carried the seed of Christianity and planted it all around the eastern Mediterranean.

Each of us may plant a seed of our own. We may never know the influence we have on someone who does not know the Lord. For example, as many of you saw, I served as chaplain for the ANZAC Day service in Halswell this year and last. Although I only spoke for a short time, and certainly was not the main speaker or focus for the day, my words were heard by several hundred people. Perhaps I planted a seed in someone’s heart, a seed which God may nurture and bring to fruition. Perhaps some prayer which I prayed will reach someone who used to pray and has gotten out of the habit, or who has never prayed. We don’t know how God will use our actions to further his purpose of calling his people together.

Yesterday I led a funeral service at one of the local chapels. It was not for someone from our parish. The funeral director called me because we had worked together before at St Barnabas, and the family of the deceased asked for an Anglican priest. I did the usual thing, meeting with the family and helping them decide how the service would go. They are a lovely family from the UK. We got together and arranged the service, using our prayer-book funeral liturgy.

The people who came to the service were not church-goers, I think, for the most part. You can usually tell when you greet them at the door as they arrive. Some people will greet you in a familiar way, and you can tell they know what a priest is. Others will just say hello, or walk on in without acknowledging you. Most were friendly in the usual way, as Kiwis usually are. But most were not Christian, I would say. But I gave them a Christian service just the same. Jesus said, “If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked

day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). I would not ever want Jesus to think I was ashamed of preaching his Gospel. So I went ahead and proclaimed Christ crucified, as Paul puts it. I gave thanks, offered prayers, and commended the soul of the deceased to God’s care.

And who knows but what someone in that chapel congregation was touched by my words? Or not by my words, exactly, but touched by God through my words? If God uses the seeds of the field to proclaim his glory, how much more could he use the small efforts of people like you and me?

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands. (Psalm 19:1)

And God speaks in Isaiah of his word:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Perhaps God hardens his people’s hearts, as he did the Egyptians in Moses’ time. But surely God also softens hearts, surely he lets his word sink into the deafest ear; and God can use my words to carry his own word. I pray that when I speak in front of people outside the church that God may work in their hearts. Maybe I won’t ever see the results of that working. That’s not important. But I can pray that there are good results.

And so the seeds that we plant may well grow into the biggest plants. We must have faith: faith that God is working his purpose out; faith that we are part of God’s plan; and faith that God truly wants all people to turn to him — he does not want to lose one. And when has brought all the people he has chosen into Communion with his Son, then the Kingdom of God will indeed come — and blessed be that day. Amen.