

Living in a wooded valley, as we do, I have to admit I have a problem with trees, especially woods. Sometimes walking through them there's something that disturbs me, that feeling of being overwhelmed by them. When it's especially rainy, that sense of the greenness pressing in really troubles me – but that's enough of my need for counselling. Our bible readings today, one from Ezekiel and one from Mark all concern trees, shrubs, seeds. Along the way of unpacking them, I hope we'll discover something about God's kingdom and our place in it, how we can leave things to God, calling him Lord, rather than thinking the world revolves around us, and maybe along the way rediscover something about the Old Testament and how it still speaks to us with a consistency about God's revealed truth for all times.

I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear the word 'parable' – I guess for most of us it will be the wonderful stories that Jesus told – the parable of the sower, or the good Samaritan, the prodigal son or the wise and foolish builders (the wise man built his house upon the rock) not to mention events in scripture which also have meanings beyond the events – the feeding of the 5,000, the story of Jonah, or as we looked at last week, Adam and Eve - and there lies a problem – often they are stories we leave behind now we're adults, and that's rather missing the point. As Paula Gooder's excellent book 'The parables' (show) suggests 'the parables capture the essence of Jesus, they are playful and thought provoking, they cannot easily be tied down' - and that's exactly the point. It's really difficult to preach when the readings are parables, they need in a sense to speak for themselves, or rather that we allow the Spirit to speak through them. Yet our culture is often different to that of Jesus time, and certainly that of the Old Testament, so that a bit of background might be useful as we allow these 3 stories today to permeate our being, to be challenged and made uncomfortable by the comforter.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for parables, both in the Old and New Testaments, speak through the words we hear today to our hearts. Amen.

Time to look at some parables, then! If you have a pew bible near you, turn with me if you can to Ezekiel 17:22-24 (page 844). Imagine the scene, a great Eagle is seen in the sky, reaches out to the top of a tall cedar tree, breaks off a large branch from the top and later drops in into fertile soil where it grows and flourishes, only to be removed again by another eagle, but this time its planting proves less fertile, so it withers and dies. It's a parable about the worldly powers of the time, Babylon and Egypt, and like much of the old testament – you can read about the power struggles in the recorded history of the time, even go to the British Museum and see the enormous gates from the Babylonian power, and all that Egypt stuff there too, yet the history can only go so far. Ezekiel in chapter 17 poses a question in verse 9 and 10 – will this transplanted tree thrive – and then in our reading we find the answer – it depends... it depends on God – v22 this is what the sovereign Lord says, I will plant, v24 I am the lord, I the Lord have spoken and I will do it. We have a God who intervenes in the world through earthly powers, events and situations. Our job is to discern the Lord's will, to listen to him in prayer, to get to know his word the bible and the work and person of Jesus Christ. As Paul says in romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. It's all too easy to conform to the changes around us in the world in all sorts of areas, but then we lose our distinctive challenge as the people of God, and the challenges of living as citizens in the kingdom of God, as we shall see in the next two parables which made up our readings for today. Turn now if you can to Mark 4:26-34, two short parables of Jesus which have strong links with our Ezekiel passage too – page 1006 – Mark 4:26-34. Jesus often uses images of plants and trees in his parables. I think this is significant, he's doing more than simply borrowing from the scenery around him. He could have talked about carpentry and building when speaking about the Kingdom of God, yet he chooses often to talk about seeds, plants, trees and growth. This is an important image – the Kingdom is not a construction, but a place for growth. Buildings are static, plants are not. Growth is silent, continues when we're not watching, day and night. Even though we understand so much about DNA and evolution thanks to people like Darwin, there is a mystery still in trees, plants, and germination. It's astonishing, and we're still reliant on these natural processes for our daily bread!

Mark 4:26 begins – the kingdom of God is like... a short introduction, but an important one – it's like this – we can't pin it down, or explain it, but we can find examples of how you know that the kingdom is at work. For some of us who like clear and simple guidance, that's challenging. For others who'd rather ignore what we find difficult, that can be challenging too, but Jesus often said 'listen' – best in the 4 letter anglo saxon word... (wait for it!) Hwæt. Not just listen with our ears, but with our hearts. I'm often being told 'you're not listening', not by God, but that is often true too. What are we listening to in these two parables?

- 1) (v26-29) The kingdom grows automatically – yes, that's the Greek word in V2 – it grows without any human effort-we need to do nothing! Or rather we cannot do anything of and by ourselves. Looking at the other place this word is used might be useful here – it's in acts 12:10 when the gates of the prison where Peter was being held opens 'by itself' – it's God's sovereignty at work again, as we saw in Ezekiel. I wonder what this might say to us, today. The church of England, obsessed by mission planning, church strategies, targets, reorganisation. That's why I'm pleased that instead our Diocese of Rochester have suggested it's more about 'called to grow' and how we get alongside the sovereignty of God and see the growth take place. The Bishop of Tonbridge, Bishop Simon comments "It is our prayer that we will encounter the Holy Spirit working in all sorts of unexpected ways as we pray and ponder, prioritise and plan." In other words, it's not about getting strategies right, trying new things, following a formula or mirroring changes in society, but encountering the spirit and letting God be God.
- 2) (v30-32) Mustard – When our Son in law Come was here the other week and planning to cook for us, he was shocked that there was no mustard in the house. It's not clear from the parable what kind of mustard seed Jesus is referring to, and I don't mean Dijon or coleman's, but the comparison between the small seed and the large tree is clear, in a typical rabbinic bit of overexaggerating. Substantial growth from something so small is what matters here, a tiny seed and a tree large enough for birds (back to Ezekiel again!). As anyone who has planted veg knows, it's really amazing – small seed, large, fruitful crop. That, once again, says Jesus, is something to listen to about the Kingdom of God – let it grow, watch it grow, cultivate its growth in yourself and in others, and don't be surprised at the result.

There are so many images in the bible about the sovereignty of God, the Kingdom of God, the rule and reign of God in our lives – there are other images of parties, family relationships, things lost and found, but these parables we've been looking at this morning remind us of the mysterious energy, the presence of the Spirit, at work in us, at work without us, producing growth and vitality, even when that is not immediately obvious.

In Zechariah 4.10 we read: 'Do not despise the day of small things'. Zechariah's age is a time of people returning to God and the work of renewal God was doing was humanly speaking weak and fragile, exposed to all sorts of dangers. The renewal movement found in the ministry of Jesus and his first followers must also have seemed fragile, as Jesus preached the end of people being cut off from God because of sin, and the return of the people of God not to the land, but to the temple that was Jesus himself when they choose to serve him. The eagle transplants the tree, the small seed grows into a large tree 'all by itself', all because of the sovereign power of God; the choice of whether we're part of this kingdom is ours. And the results of this will be seen only at the end of time when Jesus returns, at the time of harvest, when someone 'puts in the sickle' (Mark 4.29).