

What is God's Kingdom like?

Mark 4: 26-34

Since we've been in Cottenham, the Rectory Garden has seen something of a transformation – from a garden initially overgrown with trees and bushes and a lawn full of moss – to a bit of an oasis with carefully chosen plants, proper flowerbeds and a lawn with now more grass than moss and clover. But, there remains one thing that we seem able to grow without any effort at all, and that is weeds. Even though there's matting out the front to prevent weeds growing, they have burst through, demonstrating a tenacity, perseverance and strength greater than ours. In the midst of bushes, bindweed and ground ivy flourishes in our garden, inviting us to tug it out but always leaving enough root to guarantee its survival for the following year, and the next, and the next ...

The traditional view of the parable of the mustard seed is that God's kingdom is like the mustard plant because it grows from small beginnings to something tall and majestic which offers shelter in its branches. In recent years, however, a growing number of scholars have begun to suggest that the parable of the mustard seed is much more radical than people have traditionally believed.

In fact, various references to the mustard plant in ancient sources suggest that it might be much less welcome to those working the ground than the traditional view implies. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder wrote a natural history in which he described the mustard plant as growing wild. Once it was planted, he commented, it was impossible to get rid of, because when its seeds fell, they germinated at once. In other words, while not quite a weed, it is one of those plants that you must plant with care because you will never get rid of it. An equivalent for us may well be mint. You'll know the advice: plant mint in its container otherwise it will take over any bed in which you plant it.

This changes the parable quite significantly. It begins the same. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a tiny seed, which germinates quickly and grows to full size swiftly. Once this has happened, you will never get rid of it. Its seeds will fall constantly, so that plants spring up all over the place. On one level, this is incredibly reassuring. It can often feel as though the responsibility for bringing God's kingdom on earth is entirely down to us, our efforts, our endeavours. But, this interpretation of the parable reminds us that, while we're called to strive as far as we can to bring God's kingdom into the places where we live, where we work, where we play ... it is no tender plant that needs just the right soil, exactly the right amount of water and sun or it will die. The kingdom

seems to be more akin to mint than dahlias, and dandelions than geraniums. Once established, it's exceedingly hard to destroy.

On another level, however, this parable is much more challenging and suggests that the kingdom is not always welcome. If the Kingdom of Heaven has qualities that are like a weed, then its attraction to birds may be something that you don't want. As the gardeners among you will know, the last thing you probably want in the middle of your nicely ordered patch is something that gives shelter to birds, since then they have an easy perch from which they can swoop down and gobble up your seedlings and berries. The image here may be of a fast-growing plant that suddenly provides unexpected shelter for birds in the middle of your cornfield.

If this is true, the parable is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven will attract to the shelter of its branches those whom you might not want in your nice, tidy patch; those who will disrupt your gardening, and those whom you might under other circumstances seek to drive away.

This is exactly what has happened to parishioners in a tiny church in a deprived area of Stoke. Due to an influx of refugees, the white faces who used to make up the congregation of St Mark's, Hanley have been replaced by an eclectic mix of Iranians, Syrians, Iraqis, Bangladeshis and Eritreans who are all either looking for salvation in another religion or simply seeking charity. I had the opportunity to speak to the vicar, the Rev Sally Smith, a few years ago - in 2016 and she told me that in just three years, there had been a total transformation of St Mark's - from a previously white, middle-class church to something resembling a refugee processing centre.

But St Mark's is far from an isolated case. Across many churches in Europe, a growing number of Muslim refugees are converting to Christianity, with some churches conducting mass baptisms. Some members of the local congregation at St Mark's were receptive. But many left, saying they feel alienated by the hundreds of new-look Christians, uncomfortable with the multicultural flags and incredulous at what they see as people taking advantage of their vicar.

Over the years, Sally Smith has housed asylum seekers, fed them, clothed them, bought new shoes for their children and looked after their medical needs. That kindness has led many to convert to Christianity – on average three to four a week. Some do it in secret, others out of a debt of gratitude; there are those seeking spiritual relief after experiencing atrocities.

In an interview by a journalist from the Guardian newspaper, Sally says, *'My biggest challenge has been the attitude of some of the people within the*

church. I have had a lot of opposition. Criticism, negative attitudes and trying to undermine the work that we are doing – that’s from the white British congregation.’

‘I have lost lots of congregation members because of what has happened at the church. They don’t want the hassle and they don’t want the church being messed up. They see the church as having a very definite role and opening the doors to refugees isn’t one of them.’

She adds: *‘They expected a vicar’s role to be looking after the people inside the church and one of the insults often levelled at me is: ‘She cares more about the people outside the church than those inside.’ Well, my reply is – ‘this is what I am meant to be doing and you’re meant to be doing it with me. We should be doing this together.’*

She is defiant, determined, but not naive. She knows that some do convert solely because they believe it will help with their asylum application, but she says these are few and far between, evidenced by the fact that most are still several years later.

At St Mark’s they receive a warm welcome – and, in the five years since I spoke with Sally, a whole new support service has been established, called Sanctus (meaning holy) – a support service for refugees of all faiths and none. Have a look online – it’s so inspiring. It’s sad though, that of Sally’s original congregation, only four remain, the rest deciding to worship instead at other churches in the town where church life was more predictable and less diverse. But the new congregation continue to be passionate about Jesus, and desperate to study and understand the Bible. Challenging and exciting are the words Sally uses to describe life at St Mark’s. What is God’s kingdom like? Challenging and exciting, I suspect, and just the teensiest bit scary.

As we pray the Lord’s Prayer and ask for God’s kingdom to come on earth, do we really know what we’re asking for? Are we *really* prepared for the disruption that the kingdom may bring? If the kingdom attracts the kind of people with whom Jesus spent his days, the outcast and the poor, beggars and sinners, then might we just regret it if God *does* listen to our prayer for the coming of the kingdom and answer it. I pray that we would be a Church that *would* want to welcome all kinds of people that God’s kingdom will attract. And let’s not be daunted by how small the start may be, but pray with confidence that God will use each and every one of us to build his kingdom here on earth, here in Cottenham and Rampton, here today. What is God’s kingdom like? Challenging and exciting, and just the teensiest bit scary. But something none of us can afford not to be a part of. Amen.