

Let me set the scene for today's reading. News of Jesus's teaching and healing has started to spread as he and his disciples, travel from town to town around Galilee. Large crowds start to gather wherever he stops to teach and on this occasion the crowd is so large that he commandeers a boat and rows out a short distance so everyone can hear, whilst the crowd sit attentively along the lakeshore.

Like most of Jesus's parables, today's two are not just straightforward illustrations, similes or metaphors which explain what he is talking about - as the final verse of our reading makes clear - Jesus explained the parables to his disciples privately, "at a later time".

What is certain, however, is that Jesus used examples from the everyday lives of his listeners. And that's part of the problem for us today because those listening on that lakeshore knew from first-hand experience what he was talking about.

They had either seen people walking through a field scattering seed by hand or had done it themselves; they herded sheep; they worked in a vineyard or wheat field; they related easily to what it meant to be a slave or servant to an absentee master - because that was part and parcel of the dynamics of life in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Galilee.

We simply have no experience of that life except perhaps through the lens of a pilgrim visiting a living museum in Nazareth or walking through part of the Judean wilderness as some of us hope to do next year.

However, I'm pretty certain that we do share at least one thing in common with the first century audience sitting on that lakeshore - in that at some time in our lives we have grown something from seed, even if it was growing cress in the primary school classroom or entering the tallest sunflower competition.

On that subject, many years ago, Danny, my very annoying neighbour used to rabbit on about how good his sunflowers were; he'd explain in great detail how he prepared and fertilised the soil, built a cloche to protect the fledgling plant after sprouting, watered the plant with exactly the right amount of water at the same times every day and so on and so on. And to be fair, they were always tall and healthy.

One year he gave me a single seed and encouraged me to grow a sunflower too. He was not amused when mine grew at least 2-3 feet taller than any of his. How mine grew so spectacularly, I have no idea; it certainly wasn't down to anything I did.

Indeed, if abusing a plant through negligence was a criminal offence then I would have been banged up good and proper.

How it grew to that size and strength despite my failure to nurture it in any way was a complete mystery. But then, isn't that true about the kingdom of God? Isn't mystery in the very nature of how the kingdom grows?

Metaphorically speaking, the seed in the parable is God's word and when sown, the kingdom will grow within those who hear and receive God's word. My role, indeed, the role of every believer, is to sow that seed and then leave the growth of the kingdom to the Holy Spirit.

We can encourage good healthy growth by supporting and encouraging individuals, but the reality is that how the kingdom grows will always be a mystery.

Let's return to the lakeshore for a few minutes in relation to the parable of the mustard seed. It is a fact that there are many seeds smaller than a mustard seed, including the orchid seed which is so small and fine that it is almost dust-like.

But the mustard seed was the smallest seed ever sown by a 1<sup>st</sup> century farmer and would typically grow to bush heights of 15-20 feet – plenty large enough to hold a bird's nest.

The point here is that mustard seeds are not only are very small, but also...well just plain ordinary... and yet their produce in relation to their size is quite extraordinary. That's true for spiritual and kingdom seed too. It was true in Jesus's time and it's equally true 2,000 years on.

Back in the early 80's my spiritual seed was parched and withering...until one Sunday at the end of a service in this church someone invited me stay for coffee. They hadn't spoken to me before and I certainly didn't know them. Little did that person know the consequences of that invitation....my presence here today can be directly attributed to that one small and ordinary gesture.

But it has taken time; indeed it's taken nearly 40 years – well over half my life – as God has waited patiently for the seed sown that day to sprout, grow and finally, blossom.

And there have been many other small and ordinary gestures during those years which has shown me what the kingdom is like.

The kingdom is like when a person goes out of his or her way to offer someone a lift to church.

Or it's like when someone takes time out of their busy hectic life to spend 30 minutes talking to someone who is lonely.

Or it's like someone taking hold of a friend's hand to offer comfort and support as they sit beside their friend in a hospice. It is whenever you sow God's word into another person's life by doing that small, ordinary thing out of love.

The role of every believer is to sow the seed which the Holy Spirit will then nurture to maturity. How that happens is a mystery, but as we are told in 2 Corinthians 9:6 "If you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly; if you sow bountifully, you will also reap bountifully."

Our faith, our relationship with God grows through patiently living out all those small and very ordinary acts of kindness and love. But perhaps more importantly, when we sow bountifully into the lives of others, God's kingdom will be enlarged and enriched in ways we can only marvel at.

Let me finish with a short prayer by Pete Grieg

Lord, may we know the grace to embrace my own finite smallness in the arms of God's infinite greatness.

May God's Word feed us and his Spirit lead us into the week and into life to come.

Amen

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 13 June 2021**