

SERMON: 17 JUNE 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“IN THE MIDST OF THE OLD, THE NEW IS GROWING”
(2 Cor 5:6-10, 14-17, Mark 4:26-34)**

Jesus use of the two parables about sowing seed and growing seed show us two main principles of God’s kingdom.

First of all, the parable about sowing. In verse 26, the sower scatters seed on the ground, suggesting a random, organic, unpredictable nature to the kingdom, where growth is left to the mercy of the wind, the rain, the sun, the quality of the soil.

Yet despite the uncertainties involved in this scattering approach, there is something which Jesus appears to be confident about in his telling of the parables. And that is, that growth, which cannot be seen, will lead to a harvest. That which is hidden and unrecognised, will be uncovered and seen. As one Bible commentator puts it, “it will come, in God’s time and in God’s way, not by human effort or in accordance with human logic” (R T France, The Gospel of Mark, 215).

We believe that the kingdom of God is here already but it’s not yet complete. It is breaking through in the midst of our world, like the seeds sown break through the soil in which they were sown. Anyone who’s ever sown seeds know that there is a waiting period, in which we might be tempted to think that nothing is happening, we might even poke around to see if there has been any change under the surface, and risk doing great damage if we do. We might give up, certain that nothing will appear and stop the watering and feeding. We might even forget where we scattered the seed and not see the results, until we unexpectedly stumble upon these strange new plants which have appeared, and realise we had a hand in planting them.

Jesus came announcing that the kingdom of God was appearing, it is at hand, it is within you. He was announcing that God has planted the seeds of his kingdom within the human heart, echoing what the Philosopher said in the Book of Ecclesiastes (3:10), God has placed eternity within the human heart.

So then, if it is God who has planted the seed of his kingdom within us, then we can have confidence that the seed will grow until the time of the harvest.

As Paul puts it in the reading from 2 Corinthians, we can walk confidently by faith and not by sight, the love of Christ urging us on (5:7 and 5:14).

That seed of love wants to produce other seeds of love. We're not to keep it just for our own good, but for the good of others. We are to share the love, scatter our own seeds of love, random acts of kindness sown in faith, believing in God to bring the growth, believing in the God who has announced that whoever is in Christ is a new creation, the old has passed away, everything has become new (5:17), and that that good news is to be passed on and shared and now influences everything about how we now live.

Which brings us on to the second parable, the parable about growing, the parable of the tiny mustard seed becoming the biggest garden plant. As it suggests its all about growth, about how, even when a tiny seed is sown, it will grow and provide growth and blessing for another part of God's kingdom, just as the mustard seed grew into a plant where the birds of the air could nest in its branches. Creation was renewed, blessed, grew as a result of that little seed having been sown. Who knows what blessings might come, when small seeds are sown?

Great oaks grow from little acorns. We must never despise the day of small beginnings nor "be impatient for the full majesty of God's kingdom to be revealed" in all its power (France, 216).

Jesus' hearers would have heard this parable as alluding to the great tree in Ezekiel's messages from God.

22 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take a branch from the top of a tall cedar, and I will plant it on the top of Israel's highest mountain. 23 It will become a majestic cedar, sending forth its branches and producing seed. Birds of every sort will nest in it, finding shelter in the shade of its branches. 24 And all the trees will know that it is I, the Lord, who cuts the tall tree down and makes the short tree grow tall. It is I who makes the green tree wither and gives the dead tree new life. I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do what I said!" (17:22-24)

This word was given to God's people during the exile in Babylon and would have given great hope to those who hoped to return home. It was partly fulfilled when their captivity was ended, the tall tree of Babylon was cut

down, (Nebuchadnezzar's reign ended and he went mad in the desert for 12 months until he recognised that the God's rule alone was eternal and his kingdom everlasting, and he began to worship God - Daniel 4), and they were able to begin to return to Israel in 537BC to begin laying the foundations of the second temple.

A couple of thoughts to finish with. Firstly, as Rob Bell says about a sermon which I believe applies well to the church, I think its the church's role to continually insist that through the resurrection of Jesus, a whole new world is bursting forth right here in the midst of this one, and everybody everywhere can be a part of it.

Secondly, the church must recognise that the kingdom of God is not limited to the affairs and activities of the church. We've been singing today, that all over the world the Spirit is moving. God is already at work in people's lives. What we're trying to do, is not dig up that work unnecessarily but to water and feed faith in others, however and whenever we can, watching for opportunities, having the courage to try new things, to scatter new seeds, and helping one another to discover the true potential that God will bring forth within us all, the kingdom of heaven. To him be the glory, now and forever.