

Sunday between 12th and 18th June [11]

Mark 4:26-34

Our gospel reading sees Jesus describe the kingdom of God like a mustard tree, grown from the tiniest seed and becoming a most mighty tree. Not all of us are necessarily great gardeners, but we can all appreciate the imagery and metaphor in a story of growth from seed to tree.

It's not really surprising that we are fascinated by trees and indeed all plants when we think of how they grow. The mustard seed may be very tiny but in all cases plants begin with small seeds in comparison with the finished product. We have all heard the saying from little acorns mighty oak trees grow, this is another expression of our constant surprise at how in that tiny package of a seed we can hold in our hand, is contained everything needed to produce an enormous tree.

Some plants grow incredibly quickly like the bamboo or banana plant, others take many, many decades to reach their full potential, but the speed of growth is not important, the lesson for us and the imagery we use is that of uncontrolled growth, a growth that occurs seemingly without any interference from us, that makes the plant unrecognisable when compared to the seed.

In the gospel there are 2 images of growth. The first is a description of how little people do to affect the growth of plants. We put the seed in the best environment that we can, but the rest happens outside our control. We can pull the plant up and disrupt its growth, we can keep a careful watch on the environment and feed and water the plant to help it along, but the seed has to sprout and lay down its own roots, we cannot do that on the seed's behalf. So it is with growing in faith for us and those around us. We can put ourselves, and others, in the path of a good environment to grow faith, we can read our scripture, attend church, surround ourselves with people of faith, but the only person who can let God into their lives is the individual person. No one can do that for us and we cannot do it for anyone else. Seeds are certainly planted by the faithful but God alone gives the growth. This is an image of God as sanctifier, the one who makes people holy and set apart from the world through faith.

Then there is the second image in the gospel, that of the kingdom of heaven compared to a mustard seed. This is not unlike the image of God giving the growth but is concerned not with the individual but with the whole body of Christ. The kingdom of heaven came to our attention through Jesus, his life, witness, death and resurrection drew us to his vision for the world, a vision where love is always the first response in any situation, a world where the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick and imprisoned are comforted, the stranger made welcome. But from Jesus, through the spirit, came the church and like that mustard seed where there was once a tiny lone voice describing this vision, now the whole world is covered by people who share that vision. Not all people, but amongst all people, there are Christian voices lobbying for kingdom values to guide our societies. This is an image of God the

sustainer, the one who makes it possible for us to grow even in the most hostile environments.

Then there is St Paul's letter to the Corinthians, not an image of a tree in sight for this portion of scripture but the message eloquently described in the images of trees made plain in St Paul's inimitable way. "For the love of Christ controls us once we have reached the conclusion that one man died for all". We see God in the image of the tree because Christ's calling in our lives has given us that sight, as Paul says, we are no longer at home in the body for that makes us exiles from the Lord, our ambition is to be exiles from the body in order to make our home with the Lord.

We see God's power in the world, we recognise God in the righteous, we live the understanding that God gives us the growth by grace when we come to faith, and if God does it for us God will do it for others, but we know for sure we can't do it for anyone else. This may be the hardest part of today's scripture for us to swallow, we cannot do this for anyone else, only they can. It has been said that God has no grandchildren which is a wonderful description of our individual relationship with God. Each one of us, at our baptism, is made a child of God. We are not Christians because we were brought up in a Christian home or because we celebrate culturally Christian festivals, we may have had Christian values rub off on us from others in our lives, but we are only Christian because we choose to accept God's grace in our lives and grow in faith.

But we can be part of the gardening work of bringing about the kingdom, we can ensure that the ground is prepared, that people get to hear the word of God. We can nurture growth through our commitment to other people in the Church and outside of it. We can plant seed through our example, our actions, our words and our prayers. Then, because of the faithfulness of God we will see God's kingdom taking shape in our world. Some days it's harder to spot that others, but like the mustard tree, from the tiniest of kingdom seeds great things will grow and flourish. Our job is to keep planting those seeds, we must trust that God will do the rest.