

TO WHAT SHALL I COMPARE THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

PREACHER : The Revd Rob Ryan, Cathedral Curate

Sunday 14th June 2009

Trinity I

Mark 4: 26 – 34

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

I'm a bit of a geek!

I'm a geek because I love the internet.

I enjoy spending time staying in touch with people over Facebook, I Tweet, I blog, I read other peoples blogs, I visit You Tube and a great variety of websites and come across some amazing stuff. One of my favourite sites is www.improveverywhere.com.

Improveverywhere.com causes scenes of chaos and joy in public spaces, says the blurb on the homepage. This group of people have been going since 2001 and how it works is this. They gather together hundreds of agents, normal people like you and me, to be involved in what they call missions in a public space and they put videos and photos of their mission on this particular website.

These missions are amazingly creative and one of my favourites is having around 400 people at Grand Central Station in New York who synchronise watches beforehand and then all freeze for 10 mins. in the station at a set time. They film peoples reactions which are quite funny.

The latest mission that has appeared on this website is a surprise wedding reception. They managed to get use of 4 gazebos that had been set up in Manhattan park, waited on the steps of the registry office and offered the free wedding reception to a couple that came out with just 4 members of their family. On the video you can see the couples, and their families, disbelief ... where's the catch? I'm a cynical New Yorker ... but when it dawned on them that this was for real they became excited and went with it. Imagine the surprise when they saw 50 guests, waiting staff with trays of champagne, the DJ warming up, and of course a wedding cake and gifts. All unexpected. All a surprise. If you check out the website you can see the real and genuine joy on their faces. Afterwards the agents received an email from the couple: 'thanks - that was amazing; you gave us just about the best wedding story anyone could have to pass on.'

The Kingdom of God is like a surprise wedding reception.

It's free, brings great joy and sometimes you can't see it coming till it's there!

In these two parables in our gospel reading today, Jesus uses seeds to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is like. To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?

Before we investigate that further I want to take a step back and ask - what is this Kingdom of God that Jesus is talking about? I believe along with others such as Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, that this is not about the end of creation but about its renewal.

Quick history lesson. In the time of Jesus, Israel is under the occupation and oppression of the Roman army. Rome ruled violently and the people were desperate for freedom. The spirit of uprising was in the air. The phrase 'Kingdom of God' would have been very common to a 1st century Jew. This was not a term plucked out of the air by Jesus. To a 1st century Jew, Kingdom of God meant one thing, it spoke of the return of God to be their king, the King of Israel. God would come back and walk with them, as God walked with them in the Garden of Eden. This would obviously mean an end to exile, an end of caesar, the false king, and the restoration of Israel to how it was always meant to be.

Then, and this is key, and something we seem to have lost in western Christianity... life would carry on on earth, with God living on earth with his people. They would see an end to oppression, an end of pain, an end of injustice.

In the words of the Lord's prayer, Jesus actually taught us to pray for this ... 'may your kingdom come, may your will be done, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN!'

As a brief aside, I'd love to go into all of this a lot more, but in that prayer, as well as the mustard seed parable, Jesus challenges the Jews thinking on Kingdom of God. They believed God was returning to renew and lead the Jewish nation; Jesus makes it clear that God is returning to renew the whole earth, all peoples and all of creation.

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of heaven coming, his audience would have had in their mind the image of God returning to renew Israel. They had in mind the end of oppression, the end of Caesar's rule, the end of pain and suffering and hunger pretty major and exciting stuff ...

and yet Jesus says

to what can I compare the Kingdom of God?
It is like a mustard seed!

He takes this amazing event, the return of God, the one thing they have been longing for for hundreds of years, something that will change history for ever and equates it to something as small, as insignificant, as ordinary, as bland, as so everyday and boring as a tiny mustard seed! I would have brought one to show you what all the fuss is about, but it's so small that you would not be able to see it.

What is it about a mustard seed that Jesus wants us to understand in a Kingdom of God way? There are a few things that I would like to draw your attention to.

Mustard seeds will grow anywhere. We have all seen the classroom experiment and grown mustard and cress on wet towels, bits of plastic, in dark hideaways, in bright sunshine. I even remember as a young teacher having them in my pocket, walking home in the rain and getting drenched only to find the next day that the mustards seeds had sprouted. Maybe Jesus is saying the Kingdom can and will grow anywhere, even in those spaces where you would not expect to see it growing. It's like there is a mustard seed mentality that says 'I want to grow here and so I will grow here!'

As a pioneer minister my role is to seek out people who are interested in exploring their journey of faith. My mission is all about developing a new way of being church. To develop church that will connect with people who for many reasons will not enter a church building. Part of this involves me in searching for those places where God is already at work in peoples lives. Or, in other words, looking for those places where the Kingdom has already started to break into our time. As the mustard seed grows anywhere and in unlikely places, I have found the Kingdom seeping through in places like Wetherspoons, the sauna, in a film club on street corners - in normal everyday places.

I have been visiting Wetherspoons on a nearly daily basis since I was ordained. Amazingly I have experienced the kingdom of God moving people in this place. A place, to be honest, where some would frown on Christians for going but a place where God is clearly present. Here is a place where God has been stirring people. Many there will not recognise that it is God but that takes nothing away from what is happening.

One day while sitting in Wetherspoons a bloke in his early 60's came and knelt at my feet and wept. We chatted and I prayed with this man. Not normal behaviour in a pub - extraordinary behaviour - the effect of God maybe? Kingdom behaviour? On another occasion a younger man shared some stuff that was going on in his life and how he was worried. He told me how the night before he felt a holy presence with him and the words 'trust me, I am with you to the ends of the earth.' I shared that might be God and the thought had not even crossed his mind 'do you really think so?' was his

comment. Normal behaviour - or God's Kingdom? Surely the Kingdom of God can't be seeping into the world through a place like Wetherspoons - well it could be with a mustard seed mentality.

I have lots more stories to share - but you wouldn't like me if I told them all now!

If you hold mustard seeds in your palm there is something very present and yet very future about them. The seed exists, it is there, you can see it in your hand and yet the seed points to something in the future that is more complete. The seed you hold is not the final product, it is not supposed to stay as a seed, that would be pointless. There is an inevitability about that seeds future, it will grow and something amazing will be seen as a result.

At the very start of this gospel Jesus claims in Mk 1 v15 that 'the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news'. What Good News? I became a Christian at 17 and grew up believing that the good news was that Jesus died and rose again so that I may have a living relationship with God. That's still true - but what is the good news that Jesus is preaching here. It can't be the death and resurrection as we are still a way of from that! The good news is that the Kingdom of God is about to start. It is near, Jesus inaugurated it at the resurrection. That's the good news for today!

The Kingdom is only here in part, there is a lot more to come. As we can hold a mustard seed in our hand and imagine the potential for the future, we can believe the Kingdom has started, and we can dare to dream what it will be like when it fully comes.

The awe of surprise in this mustard seed parable is clear. Jesus is saying that despite being the smallest of all seeds it becomes the greatest of all shrubs, so big that birds can make their nests in it. It's a seed with attitude! The birds of the air are, I believe, symbolic of an indication of the inclusivity of the Kingdom as I suggested earlier. All are welcome, all are invited and all can find rest in the Kingdom of God.

The most profound thought that comes to me when I consider the mustard seed is the ordinariness of this image. To me this shouts that the Kingdom of God, as special and amazing as it is, will be found in the ordinary and everyday. That is how I see God connecting with his people on a daily basis; in the normal activities of secular life - drinking coffee, having a beer, working out in the gym, chatting on street corners. God's Kingdom is breaking out in the everyday.

So how does this help us to live as Christians, what is our role here? Can we even have a role in the building of the Kingdom? God builds God's Kingdom, and we, created in his image, male and female, rich and poor, young and those born a little earlier, are called as stewards to be involved in building **for** the Kingdom. The parables make it clear that there is nothing we do to cause the growth, that is totally in God's domain, but we can be involved in building **for** the Kingdom.

How do we join in? - well in the words of the Bishop of Durham:

Every act of love, gratitude and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care or nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings, and for that matter for ones fellow non-human creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed which spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honoured in the world - all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation which God will one day make.

So; don't underestimate your acts of kindness, your love for others, your creativity, your normal everyday mustard seed activities; for through them you join with God and build for his Kingdom.