



## Sermon on Sunday 16 June 2024

*In the name of God, source of all being, eternal word and Holy Spirit*

**Seeds.** Where would we be without them! Pumpkin seeds, mustard seeds, seeds for lettuce, beetroot and tomato, seed potatoes, the list goes on. And when we turn to the Gospel and the words of Jesus it's no different: growing seeds, mustard seeds, a sower, sowing seeds. We seem to be inundated with seeds!

But it is, after all, the Green Season in Church, when our thinking is all about seeds and growth and new beginnings. Having experienced, over the past six months, Purple, White and Red, representing times of preparation (Purple), suffering (Red) and resurrection (White), our worship now settles down into Ordinary Time (which is actually far from Ordinary!) of Green growth, of roots, shoots and fruit-bearing. All emerging from the seed of God's Kingdom, which God the Creator patiently prepared, before even the world and its green grasses were formed, out of his abundant love.

So what I want to do today is to look at those two very simple parables in our Gospel in greater depth, to help us to discern where the roots of growth come from, how we might grow.

Jesus, rooted in the soil himself, all those years living an ordinary family life in Galilee, makes two striking points in these ever-so down-to-earth parables. Let's look, firstly, then, at the parable of the Growing Seed. "The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how."

I will never forget the time when I was on retreat, and it suddenly hit me, with great impact, what seems to be going on here. And that is that real growth is both hidden and mysterious, and it happens (by divine initiative) almost without our doing anything: as we sleep and rise, night and day. What I discovered really challenged me, because it turned on its head my usual assumption that what really matters is the half of my life that's about what I do – what happens, if you like, by day-light – and not what happens in the other half of life, when it's dark and I'm sleeping & nothings happening!

True spiritual growth, Jesus seems to be saying, for those rooted in him, happens naturally, by God's initiative, and it happens not just when we're praying or thinking about God, but when we're asleep. Now there's a challenge! I better go and try and get more sleep, and not be so busy all the time! So perhaps growing the Church and indeed finding a healthy way of living our faith in society is less about what we do, than what God does, in spite of us. All we can do, in one sense, to grow in God's Kingdom, is to clear space for God to act, to live and grow and pray within us... and we therefore need, to quote one of my favourite poets, to 'Learn to be what we are in the seed of your spirit'; freeing ourselves from all those things which 'limit our secret and undiscovered road.'

It's like one of those children's experiments, planting mustard seeds in pots and watching them grow. It really is as simple as that: all we need to do is to provide water and space and light, and God will do the rest.

There is something, if we stop to think about it, profoundly challenging going on here, which is true of both our parables: the growing seed and the mustard seed. And that is that the real foundation of our life is not what's visible but what's invisible; it's not what's on the surface but beneath the surface (like the iceberg floating, 9 tenths beneath the water). We live in a society, and even a church (dare I say it) obsessed with externals – buildings, resources, money, facilities & numbers – when in the Gospels Jesus is reminding us that what really matters is that which is within and beneath the surface. This is the real space from where God secretly acts.

Hence the words of St Paul in our New Testament reading: 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; [for] if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.' In other words, Paul seems to be saying, don't look at or be concerned primarily about what lies on the outside, but concentrate on what lies at the heart. As in Matthew 6.33, after telling us not to worry about food or drink or clothing, Jesus says 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' I'm sure God doesn't mind if we enjoy nice clothing and have a good fashion sense, but we need to look beyond these things if true growth is to come!

So we've been looking at the root of seed growth, beneath the surface of the soil, where God is at work, and this leads us to define a different relationship between our outside and our inside, between our deepest desires and others' expectations, with time and space, living more wholly in the present, where we are and where God most certainly is.

But what happens, I wonder, if we do this, and allow God to nurture true growth, at its root? Well if we study the parable of the mustard seed we discover something quite extraordinary. We discover that if these conditions are met, and our roots go deep, then not only will growth mysteriously come – the tiniest seed becoming the greatest tree – but, even more than this, the birds of the air will come to shelter in its branches. And this means that our growth will necessarily encompass service of others and of the common good.

*If you look at our wonderful tapestry, in the Foyer, of our church family pictured as a tree, you will notice two particular things: the deep roots, + the birds nesting in the branches – a reminder of the importance of deep roots in Christ + our charism of hospitality, birds representing the various groups using our St John's Centre.*

This, after all, was the vision of Ezekiel, that from a mere sprig, God would bring forth the great cedar of Israel, providing protection for all kinds of birds, representing all races and nations. And in the same way, true growth in God's kingdom, is not just subterranean, but bears fruit in transformed relationships above ground, loving community and service of others in their diverse needs. Living faith is never one-dimensional but always at least two dimensional, rooted vertically in the hidden life of God, in prayer and trust, and reaching out horizontally, in loving service of God's world. And this means looking beyond our own self-interest, and reaching out to serve the poor, the sick, the oppressed and the anxious; all those whom God has a care for, even if society does not. We need to dare, like the grain of wheat, to die to our own self-interest, if we are truly to bear fruit in the world.

And let me finish with well-known words of Isaiah, which speak to our desire, in this Green Season, to grow in depth, in order that our seeds might grow and we might better serve God's kingdom:

<sup>6</sup>Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; <sup>7</sup>let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup>so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me fruitless, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose & succeed in the task I gave it. **Amen**

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