

PENTECOST 3 YEAR B / 17 JUNE 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM.

As you know, I'm into growing things, especially native trees and shrubs. Glenys kindly brought me a bag full of seed pods from the kurrajong trees on the farm. They are a fascinating looking seed pod, the seeds of which were ground up by Aboriginal people as a form of flour for cooking. The kurrajong is possibly one of the slowest growing native trees there is in Australia. I'm not sure who planted the kurrajongs on the farm but if they are of any size they were planted a good many years back. Anyway, I have extracted the seeds out of the pods and planted them into the seedling trays I use. But I did that with a sense of ambivalence, not about growing kurrajong trees, but the fact that I know I will never see them to maturity. Should they eventually be planted in the ground somewhere, they will outlast me by many years.

Many of the images Jesus used in the parables came from an agricultural and horticultural framework. Today's gospel contains two such parables and I'd like to focus on them in turn.

We've had a granddaughter after our five grandsons. The confinement of our daughter-in-law gave us the joy of having our little grandson stay over two nights while his sister was born. On my day off on Monday he was there for the whole day. I had some ground ready for planting so he came out in the afternoon to help me plant a second sowing of snow peas. Now I know, had he been staying into the next day, the one thing he would have wanted to see was the new plants he had helped sow. The process takes far too long in a child's mind. It is doubtless for that reason that his Mum and Dad didn't tell him about the baby coming until getting close to the time, so that they wouldn't be constantly asked when it was arriving.

I don't know of one seed that will germinate in the light. Perhaps there are some but I've never heard of one. The process of the transformation of a seed into the beginnings of a plant takes place hidden from our eyes. Not unlike the process of the conception and gestation of a baby. It's almost as if it is too mysterious and holy for us to comprehend. Listen to the first of these two parables again.

(read Mark 4:26-29)

The two key phrases in the parable are these: "The kingdom of God is as if", and, "he does not know how." Put another way: the process of the kingdom of God in our world will always remain a mystery to us.

A small group of people, emanating from our last Church Council, met at the manse of Wednesday evening to work on revising our mission and our goals for the future, based around the excellent input given in the recent responses. It really is quite a challenge to express in words what we perceive as the expression of the kingdom in and through us. Not least because our words, our mission statements, our vision, our goals are and remain just that. They do not determine the mysterious process of the manifestation of the presence of God among us, through us, and beyond us in any outreach we offer. That is not to say that the work of the group is worthless: one would hope not after the hard work we put in last Wednesday. But such work is always done within the context of the thrust of this parable and that simple phrase: "he does not know how." Put another way, we simply do not control the action of the spirit into the life of our world. The work the group will do, hopefully, will simply find a framework through which we open ourselves to that mysterious, yet beautiful work of the spirit, manifesting the kingdom into the reality of our world.

The reading from Samuel gives another expression of the same principle. Poor old Samuel had to work his way through the whole lot of Jesse's sons, all except one of whom had been deemed by Jesse to be suitable material for the next king of Israel. When Samuel gets to the end of the sons presented, he is a bit non-plussed and asks if that is the lot. And it is the least kingly one, a poet, songwriter, shepherd lad – not even considered by his dad as a possibility – who is in fact the one. Samuel had been taken in by the strapping nature of Jesse's boys. When Eliab, the eldest is presented he thinks: "Yeah, look at this bloke: he looks like kingly material. Surely the Lord's anointed is now before him." And the tension builds as God (mysteriously) instructs the prophet

not to anoint the obvious choices, the ones the political consultants or pundits would choose today - the ones with the best numbers in the polls or the best faces for television, the ones who somehow appear most qualified or capable because they are older or stronger or more impressive.

It is a bit like that mysterious process of the germination of the seed: the hiddenness to human eyes of the miracle of birth is mirrored here by the interior nature of what God is doing and how God chooses the future king of Israel. You could apply the same words to Samuel and to Jesse as Jesus applied to the farmer in the parable: "he does not know", and he does not know because he does not see as God sees.

Sometimes I feel a bit like my little grandson when he awaits some response to his sowing of seeds: I sense a frustration at the lack of immediacy in the way God works. The early church lived with a lively expectation that Jesus was going to return in the lifetime of most of them and wrap the show up. There are some groups who still hold that as a mandatory belief in joining their number. Indeed, some won't accept you into membership unless you hold a particular view about how it is all supposed to happen and in what sequence: post rapture, pre-millennialist are one such group. You wonder how long it takes for some to wake up. That God's time scale is quite different from ours. That's why I find myself touched by growing trees like kurrajongs: the outworking of the kingdom and my relationship to it is reflected in my relationship to those kurrajongs I will grow from the seeds Glenys gave me. I will play my part but the show is much bigger than my role in it.

We move on. Now I know that the traditional way of seeing this second parable relates to the relative size between a seed and the plant into which it grows. And there is a dimension of that size differential in the parable in speaking of the smallest of seeds (which it isn't) and it's putting forth large branches. So, we may have heard the parable used as allegory: just like the mustard seed starts small and grows, so might your faith if you tend it. Or second, as a fable: sometimes very large things have small beginnings, so don't be discouraged if you exercise your faith in small ways, because God will use it to do great things.

There is of course, nothing wrong with these ideas. In fact, I think they convey an important element of this parable: namely, the kingdom of God and its importance is not at first obvious. It may appear quite modest and yet exert significant, even surprising influence. No doubt, every world religion could look at its beginnings and ponder this fact: that they began with one person and one idea. A tiny, insignificant beginning compared to what history has revealed as the potential in that beginning.

But if you were wanting to use an illustration of the differential in size between a seed and its ultimate height and spread as a plant, wouldn't you be able to find a better illustration than a bush a metre or so tall? There were plenty of great cedar trees around and the difference in size between their seed and their ultimate height was phenomenal. In fact, both Matthew and Luke have altered the parable as Mark had it in order to emphasize that interpretation. Let me just read those two renditions and ask the question, what is the word they have introduced which is not in the original as Mark has it?

(read Matthew 13:31-32;
Luke 13:18-19)

Matthew makes the odd statement that it was a bush and a tree. Luke has dropped the notion of bush altogether: it is now nothing but a tree. The mustard plant was a bush and nothing but a bush. Describing it as a tree in an interpretive variation to the story they had received from Mark.

Let me ask you this, have you ever gone out and bought some seeds for known prolific weeds and planted them in your garden? I doubt that very much. Well that is what Jesus is saying is happening in this second parable. The mustard plant was the Patterson's Curse of Palestine. In fact, I feel quite sure it would be illegal in Australia to consciously propagate Patterson's Curse. It has taken over such vast tracts of excellent farming land and rendered them if not useless, then far less productive. Jeannie and I drove to Canberra in November a couple of years back to attend a wedding anniversary of friends. Up through Yass and Gundagai all this great farming

land was ablaze with purple flowers. Covered in Patterson's Curse. The notion of someone bringing some mustard seeds home and planting them in one's paddock is of a like ilk in Jesus' day. I don't think they had a Lands Department in Palestine then but if they had then the mustard plant would have been on its list of noxious weeds.

I don't think we will grasp this parable unless we can picture Jesus telling it with the hint of a smile on his face. It is a joke, the idea that one would plant mustard seeds in one's fields or garden. So the people of Palestine who first heard this parable would have been thinking "You are joking, right. As if we would consciously sow mustard seeds! What is he on about?"

So, for us to get into this parable, we need to pick our favorite garden-variety weed -- dandelion, onion grass, sour grass -- and then ask, now why is Jesus comparing the kingdom to that. Oh, and that part about the birds seeking refuge. I suppose you could see it as a compensating image: "Ah well, at least birds get to rest in mustard bushes." Or maybe, given the unfavorable reference to birds in the previous parable about the sower -- eating the seed off the path -- it suggests that once mustard shrubs take root, all kinds of things happen including the sudden presence of "undesirables."

John Dominic Crossan, the Irish American scholar whom some of us have heard on the DVDs we have used in the evening gathering, puts it this way, and I quote:

"The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, more like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties."

So the coming of the kingdom and its life in the world is something akin to the coming of a Patterson's Curse seed into a paddock, like the first unnoticed onion weed plant into one's garden. There is something ominous in its coming for that ordered, predictable scenario that existed before it came. More than that, once it has quietly taken a foothold in a place, it has the potential to make its way into the very fabric of that place beyond the control of the farmer or the gardener. Put another way, the kingdom is not safe: certainly not safe if we are even minimally satisfied with the way things are and the way our lives are and the way the world operates.

But if you're not satisfied, if you can imagine something more than the status quo of scarcity and fear and limited and sometimes perverted justice and all the rest we're regularly offered.. if you are not satisfied with that, then maybe Jesus saying that God's kingdom is infiltrating the kingdom of the world offers a word of hope: a hope that will entice, prod, or poke us into working toward the vision of the kingdom of God he proclaims. Hope is like that, you see -- it doesn't just cheer you up, it moves you to action.

I was reading a review of the recent blockbuster film *The Hunger Games*. There is a scene in it that gets at the same idea. President Snow, the totalitarian ruler of futuristic land called Panem, asks his chief Games-maker -- the one charged with creating a spectacle as entertaining as it is barbaric -- why they must have a winner. The answer? Hope. He wants to give the oppressed people of Panem hope that maybe, just maybe, the odds will be in their favor and they may win the Hunger Games and escape their life of servitude. "Hope," explains the President, "is the only thing more powerful than fear." But for that very reason is as perilous for a dictator as it is useful: "A little hope," he explains, "is effective; a lot of hope is dangerous."

That's what Jesus offers, the dangerous hope that God's kingdom is coming and while we certainly cannot control or even summon it (as in the first of today's parables) we can actively anticipate it by looking for and even aiding its unexpected growth. That, I trust, is what we do in thinking together about our future: we base that thinking on the hope that we are working within the framework of a quiet, unnoticed yet persistent and enduring force brought into our world in the life of Jesus. So, I'm looking forward to those kurrajong seeds coming through and then potting them

up. They will be an excellent reminder to me of my place in the bigger scheme of God's mighty plan for our world.