

The Second Sunday after Trinity (Proper 6)

St Luke's, Tutshill & St Michael and All Angels, Chase, 2021

2 Cor 5:6-10, 14-17 Mark 4: 26-34

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

15 years ago Emma and I went out to the diocese of Dornakal for the first time. We spent a month or so, mostly in and around the Cathedral compound itself, and when they learned that Emma was an English teacher she was quite quickly snapped up to deliver quite a lot of English lessons, and actually particularly to the teachers, to the adults who worked in the schools and hostels. One of the things that struck us both I think was that when given the opportunity to spend some sustained time with Emma, improving their (actually already excellent) English, they wanted to do two things: firstly they wanted to do some grammar, and secondly they wanted to improve their use of metaphors and similes. Metaphors and similes, we remember from our own English lessons, are ways of describing things either by comparison with something else, or by nonliteral means. Emma had huge fun with this. I remember her coming back from one lesson and describing to me how she had been using the metaphor, "my arms are killing me". Not literally, of course! Or explaining that when we welcome someone to our house and invite them to "take a chair", we are actually probably not expecting them to carry it away with them to their own home at the end of our coffee time. Both examples of metaphors. And then the similes. When Tom has preached a sermon that he thinks was bad he is 'like a bear with a sore head.' Being made to watch Star Trek was 'like torture to Emma.'

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

The Bible is riddled with similes, and actually metaphors as well. And that is of course because what the Bible is trying to do is to describe the indescribable. We always fall short when we try to describe God. Actually when we get to the deepest and most found things in life

generally we find the words fail us. It is why people make so much money composing Valentine's cards. And when we get to God we are of course talking about the most profound of all possible profundities.

There's no reason why you should remember it in particular, but last year in one of the pre-recorded Sunday services I talked about about worship, and how actually we don't define that word very well. We often say 'worship' when we mean other things. I think something like that is going on quite often when we talk about the kingdom of God. That word 'kingdom' comes up a lot in the Bible, and in our worship. After all we use it every time we say the Lord's Prayer: "thy kingdom come".

But what do we actually mean when we talk about the kingdom? What does Jesus mean when he talks about the kingdom? Well that is such an interesting and almost endless question that the church spends half a year, every year, exploring it. If you think about it we begin telling the story of Jesus's life in advent every year, and then through all the seasons: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost we trace the story of this most extraordinary of men. And though the second half of the year, in these long successive Sundays after Trinity, 25 of them this year, we say: well okay if all of that is true, if Jesus Christ did, and said, and was, all of these things, what does it mean to look for his kingdom? What might that kingdom be like? What might it mean if that kingdom is really coming?

And because we've got 25 Sundays to ponder that, and also because I don't really know the answer, let's just note a couple of things that today's Gospel reading gives us, in similes, so that we might just spot a few things about what the kingdom might be like.

And maybe the first and most important thing to note is that the kingdom **grows**. Jesus uses agricultural images a lot of course. And at least partly because it was seen there is something organic about how the kingdom works. This reading comes straight after the parable of the sower. And it's exactly the same image. The kingdom of God is as if someone casts seed onto the ground, and day by day as that person

goes to bed, gets up again, the seed grows. Mysteriously. Amazingly. The seed grows, and it begins to produce fruit. Jesus is quite clear here that the kingdom is something that emerges over time. So is not the same thing as heaven. We often conflate those two. But here and in lots of other places in the Bible is made quite clear that the kingdom is at least partially here now. Slowly growing.

And if you remember in the parable of the sower, God is the person throwing the seed, broadcasting it all over the place, and we are the seeds. With the potential to grow and develop and be fruitful. But also with the potential to come up scraggly, or with no root. And the same is true here.

As I often say one of the great traps we fall into is assuming that we are in charge of the Church, or in charge of the gospel, or even sometimes in charge of God. We are absolutely not in charge of any of those things. We are the seed. We are scattered across creation, in our own little bit of the vineyard, with the potential to be fruitful. And what our Lord seems to be saying in this passage is that the kingdom of God is what happens when people respond to the potential to be fruitful. The kingdom of God is like shoots of faith popping up all over the place: over there, over there. In Tutshill. In Tidenham. In the Chase. In Salisbury. Wherever. The kingdom is response to the love of God. Remember what John the Baptist said: the kingdom of God is upon you: repent and believe.

And then later on: the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Now Bill Gates and his computer empire tell me that the average mustard bush can grow large enough to have a 20 foot span of branches. So is a great simile. You start off with something as tiny as the head of a pin, and out of it comes something that provides shelter for the birds of the air. Notice the two symbols there. The kingdom of God comes from something as tiny as my faith, or your faith, the faith of the youngest child in Tutshill school saying their prayers for the first time, and with that God can build a kingdom. But not only that: he builds a kingdom that is for... What? For **shelter**. To provide shade. To provide a roosting place for the birds of the air. The kingdom is supposed to be

a haven. A home. A place of shelter. Watch out for next Sundays reading where Jesus provides calm in the middle of a storm. It's exactly the same point being made.

So what God is building as he builds his kingdom is a place of security, of shelter, of sustenance. Wide branches. Just like the way he throws the seed widely. Broadcasting. This is generous. This is welcoming. It is intended to include. And it's God building that, not us. Because we are the birds of the air finding shelter. Even those of us who have been Christians from birth. We perch alongside the person who was baptised yesterday, on the branches of the tree of the kingdom which God is building.

And building it **now**. But building it out of the green shoots of our faith. Building it out of the hope, and dreams, and triumphs and failures of our own faltering response to his love.

At Tidenham and Tutshill:

And because he knows how faltering we are he continually feeds us with similes and metaphors and symbols and sacraments. And we are just about to encounter another one as we gather around the altar. The kingdom of God is like bread placed into the hands of a sinner. The kingdom of God is like a gift, unearned, broken for many for the forgiveness of sins. The kingdom of God is like the best of friends promising to us that we will never be forgotten.

At Chase:

This church is dedicated to St Michael and all the angels. So there's another image, another symbol. Look at the angels behind the altar. The kingdom of God is as if you are surrounded, shoulder to shoulder (even in Covid times!) by the very best of friends every second of every day, because in a very real sense the angels are already in God's presence, but also here, praying with you and for you every second of every day. Surrounded by angels, cheering us on, as our faith pokes through the dark earth, and the kingdom grows.

Amen.