

## Mark 4:26-34

Children's talk:

At the end of the school service to mark Founders Day, Charles Kingsley's 199th birthday, and the 165th birthday of the school, we sang a song about.... seeds. Can anyone who was there remember what seeds I then took as an example of what we might grow into?

Sequoia... seed planted after CKs death in 1875 by his daughter rose from a cone, CK had collected on his travels in North America with her. Sequoia can live for 1000s of years, so at a mere 140ish years old, ours is a mere baby!

But not every tiny seed is meant to grow into a giant tree. Let's have a look at some other seeds; actual seeds, not the fruiting bodies that hide them. (Use a selection, stuck cello tape, with the label hidden in my fingers).

Different seeds, produce different plants, and have different uses?

If you're a seed, what sort of plant do you think you might grow into?

What is a grown-up 'x' going to look like?

What is an adult 'y' going to do?

God has sown many different sorts of seed in the world. Not just for the plants we see, but in us. As we grow in our understanding of God through knowing Jesus, we will find that God grows us into all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Part of that growing happens through what we learn in Bible stories, and that's why we focus on them in our different ways on a Sunday. So.... here's your message in a bottle for this week's Bible story for the children.

Pray.

Sermon:

So, seeds then.

Like the rural Galileans who Jesus grew up among, and to whom he is speaking at the time of the Gospel, images that involve seeds, sowing, growing, and harvesting are ones that appeal to me. I'm a farmer's granddaughter, a gardener's daughter, and my own fingers are a little bit on the green side, when I have the time to enjoy that hobby. Jesus was very good at tailoring his speech, his parables and his teaching, to his audience, so with the Galileans I 'get' at simple level what it is that Jesus is using as an image.

Less easy however, is understanding quite what it is that he is getting at by his use of the images. Our two little seed-related parables this morning are no exception, especially since they are perhaps not as familiar as the parable earlier in this chapter of Mark, the one that describes the different conditions in which seeds find themselves growing, and what that might do to the harvest. Galilean farmers would have known their scriptures in detail because of the way they were shared in community, far better than most of us I suspect, so they would understand the references that Jesus would make within them, but they wouldn't necessarily understand the meaning he was drawing from them, and that was probably intentional, because the meaning could have got him lynched!

All of these parables are Kingdom parables, and Jesus makes that quite explicit. Whether Galilean farmer or a Pharisee from Jerusalem, most Jews at in Jesus time were anticipating the point when God would restore the fortunes of the people of Israel, and judgement would fall on those nations responsible for its oppression. They were thinking that this might happen in a moment of great and glorious victory with the destruction of all their enemies. Jesus was speaking into this hope, and explaining why is it that he has been planted, if you like, on earth? If people were going to understand the significance of what Jesus would go on to do in his death and resurrection, they needed to know the purpose that lay behind him being here in the first place. But

his understanding of these things was significantly at odds with Israel's hope of condemnation for all who stood against it.

The first of these little parables with the seed springing to new and fruitful life from its dormant state whilst a human takes his life's cycle of day and night, waking and sleeping, is all about God's creative action in the world. Yet significantly, the word for 'get up' was also commonly used for resurrection. Resurrection, in the understanding of the time, wasn't about life after death, but again about the restoration of Israel's fortunes. The image of the sickle and the harvest is a reference to Joel 3:13 prophesying this coming of they expected to be the Day of the Lord.

Yes, Jesus ministry in Galilee was the seed sowing of God's long-promised and long-awaited harvest. Those who were tempted to dismiss him as the carpenter's son turned wandering rabbi, would be shocked if they were to discover that we are still talking about him, and understanding his significance for the world two millennia later. God was doing a far great work than they could have imagined. The people of Jesus' time wouldn't be able to see what he was saying and doing grow to the point of harvest, nor necessarily will we, but the harvest is coming.

When we sow a seed, it often comes from a packet with a picture on it that tells us what it's going to grow into. Or if you're like my father, it's seed saved from last year's Runner Beans, so he knows exactly what he's going to grow... more of the same. That was how the Galilean farmers would have worked too - keeping back some of one year's crop to sow the next. But what was the harvest from the Jesus-seed going to look like?

When the people of Israel had asked a similar question, through the prophecies of Isaiah, they had got an answer that they weren't particularly comfortable with. Isaiah 40:18 asks to what shall we compare God? The answer was that you can't make a model or image that looks like him, because he's too vast and amazing for a mortal to incapsulate easily into words or images. The closest they got was to describe God as enthroned in heaven, stretching out like a huge canopy, before whom we mortals are tiny grasshoppers and the rulers of the nations wither and are blown away. The basic message was that God is bigger than what had happened to Israel in the wilderness or in exile, and was coming to restore her. God was not a powerless idol moulder and painted by human hands.

But now that prophesy of restoration was being fulfilled, the means of God doing so was not quite what Israel had anticipated. This carpenter from Nazareth was a very small seed, but that wasn't going to stop him growing into something significant that would fruit abundantly and feed every living creature. That is what this second little parable is emphasizing, using references to this image of a tree or bush that shades and houses God's creatures gleaned from the prophecies of Ezekiel (17:23 and 31:6) and Daniel (4:12 and 21). Jesus is saying, remember who your God is and what he has promised; he will eventually provide a home and life to the whole world from this Jesus-seed.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are now the one's responsible for nurturing this Jesus seed. As with many crops, be it the corn of the Galilean fields or my father's Runner Beans, the harvest of God's Kingdom needs many seeds to grow a useful crop that will bring the whole world into God's final harvest. Neither are the seeds uniform. The abundant harvest of people who worship God in Christ Jesus do not all look the same, for the very reason that we are like him to the extent we have been made in the image of God; God's way more amazing than can be encapsulated in any one of us.

But all this means that to reap a harvest for God, we need to be sowing Jesus-seeds of many different sorts and in different conditions. It's one reason why we've moved to having a contemporary all-age service on a first Sunday; it's not to everyone's taste, but it's good seed and an appropriate growing ground, therefore we need to enable it to grow and flourish. People worship God, or at least are open to an understanding of God's action in the world in different ways, which means Jesus-seeds need to be sown outside of services, and on different days of the week. It's why we have things like ABC, Little Lights and the Lunch Club, but what other seeds do we need to sow? A small group of us were looking on Thursday night at our responsibilities to look after what it is that God has given us, and whilst that stewardship includes the financial and material resources that fund our activities and that of the wider church, we reminded ourselves that God's mission can

be through sowing the seeds of justice in environmental and other ethical matters. People can recognise and place their faith in Jesus if they see the integrity with which his followers sow the seeds of his teaching.

Neither must we dismiss the seeds that start with very small beginnings because we never know what God wants to grow from them. As I know only too well in myself, and others, the discernment of ministry roles can start at in a conversation over a pint or round the kitchen table. Just like our own sequoia, those sorts of Jesus-seeds also need careful identification, and the seed allowed to germinate in one place, before ever they are transplanted into new ground, to grow on to maturity. Likewise, a small gathering for prayer and blue-sky-thinking can lead to a significant local initiative or some great new thing that God wants to happen. Is there a seed that we've recognised as being right for the local conditions that we need to plant through conversation, prayer and a little stepping out in faith?

In Jesus' time and since, there were those who understood Jesus' parables well enough to understand that he was God's seed, and that he had been planted on earth to reveal what God's Kingdom would look like. But like the sequoia in our churchyard, the Kingdom of God has not yet grown to maturity, nor has its seed spread and germinated to fill the whole community. It is now our responsibility to go out and plant the Jesus-seed.