

SUNDAY 13TH JUNE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Thought for the Week: "The incredible vision and teaching of Jesus' parables" (Mark 4:26-34):

What a week it has been. There has been the G7 Conference of world leaders in Cornwall last weekend. There has been the decision to continue the present restrictions concerning the lockdown. There is a month or so of wall-to-wall football in the Euros, whether you love it or loathe it. And on Monday (14th June) we saw the fourth anniversary of the tragic Grenfell Tower fire where seventy-two sadly lost their lives.



Where and how does Church, and the message of the Gospel compete with all that is going on around it? It can feel we are a very small 'minority sport,' a handful of people who gather in a stone building for an hour or so on a Sunday while everything and everyone else is getting on enjoying themselves; at the beach, at the pub, or in front of their TV, doing whatever 'they want to do.'

But that is only one way of looking at things.

If we take a step back for a moment, we see Jesus shared most of His teaching not so much about the Church and Church life but about the coming of what He called "The Kingdom." He gave us also a unique style of teaching by which to understand what His kingdom might look like – what we know as "the Parables." (We have been looking at the Parables over the course of the early summer months in the "Daily Blog" following the excellent book of the same name by Paula Gooder)

Parables can be seen as 'images of promise,' or challenge of a renewed or 'other' world. What is wonderful, even 'genius,' about them is both their versatility, being able to work at many levels, and also their broad application, having almost an infinite variety of settings.

Let us take one such example and Parable, from this Sunday past's set bible text (Mark 4:26-34):

³⁰Jesus said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³²Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."



This is one of the best known and most well remembered of the Parables. Who hasn't at some time been given mustard cress seed and grown it in some sort of container on the windowsill? This highlights another of the great characteristics of Parables, they are often visual, simple and easily memorable, and have been handed down from generation to generation through families and through Sunday schools.

But sadly the understanding, and therefore the meaning, of the Parable can also slightly alter too over time and culture without us necessarily noticing it. This is particularly true in the case of the Parable of the Mustard Seed.



As I mentioned above, children the world over have grown mustard cress in tubs and containers over the years and the core concept it is communicating is that of “growing” – “if you start out by letting God’s Kingdom grow, even if it is small, great things can come from it” - hence the abundance of mustard cress.

However, those who are keen observers will have noticed, Jesus goes on to say, in verse 32, “Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”



A Mustard Tree in Israel – “Salvadora Persica,” growing to about 8-10ft tall.

There is some debate over which “largest of garden plants” Jesus is in fact talking about, but most experts have now seemed to agree that He has in mind not so much “Mustard Cress” but “Salvadora Persica,” which is native to Israel and that part of the middle east. It certainly seems to fit the bill.

Knowing this brings another number of dimensions to the central message. *Salvadora Persica* is apparently like Mint is in this country, it is prolific and pernicious – once it has been allowed to take hold it continues to grow and is almost impossible to get rid of.

Second thing, is that its branches are strong enough for birds to perch and nest in them. Although this may be somewhat comforting at first to the average nature lover, it would be good to remember most of Jesus’ original listeners were “small-hold farmers.” Birds were not seen as welcome visitors, often eating the wheat grain before it had time to take root (Mark has just told the Parable of the Sower for instance in the earlier part of Mark 4). In other words, along with the resilience and determination of the Kingdom to take hold, often in ways way beyond our control, there are also ‘the birds’ those things and people who come and seek to stifle or ‘take away’ that growth. Where the Kingdom is, you will also often find ‘the birds’ seems to be an additional message of what Jesus is saying.

When we apply this perhaps ‘enhanced’ understanding of the cultural and context of the Parable to our current life and situation this week, it is then interesting how it offers insights and perspectives that both challenge and confirm, and I believe, show Jesus’ teaching and way of seeing is just as relevant, real, and needed as ever.

The first thing is to see how God’s Kingdom far exceeds both in size and determination the ability of the Church to contain, manage, instigate, or control it. Rather than Mustard Cress, the Kingdom is far more like *Salvadora Persica*. Essentially then, the old Archbishop, Rowan William’s famous comment and quote is right, **“Mission is about finding out about what God is doing and joining in.”**

That ‘mission’ of God, what Howard calls the *Missio Dei*, can take almost an exponential number of forms and examples, not unlike the incredible growth and spread of *Salvadora Persica*. It can range from being willing to contribute by putting in a packet of pasta to a

Foodbank to world leaders being willing to commit “a billion doses of vaccine to the CoVax project” for disadvantaged countries. It can come in the form of church bellringers ringing bells seventy two times to remember the seventy two victims of the Grenfell Tower tragedy on Monday evening (thank you Banwell Ringers) to the commitment of the world’s richest countries to cut Carbon emissions earlier and more dramatically because of global warming. It can come in the form of a young person who I met this week discovering that they were deeply and profoundly loved by Jesus to meeting with families and communities showing an outpouring of love and grief over the sudden death of a dear friend and colleague.

It all seems to be part of God’s Kingdom – and His determination to it’s growth and spread in ways and contexts way beyond both our imaginings or control.

Amazing and wonderful, full of hope, potential, and possibility – if we can see things this way.

And annoying - for then there are ‘the birds.’

‘The birds’ represents that within each of us that seeks to rob both ourselves and the world of the Kingdom. It can be the voice of pessimism, cynicism, hurt or pain. When trying to see that providing a billion doses towards the CoVax vaccination project for the wider world is ‘a good start’ immediately comes back with the judgement “it’s not enough.” And, of course, it isn’t enough, we need, as the richest countries to do more, but if we ‘gobble up the seed’ of even the smallest of first attempts there is no better way to seek to destroy the tree from ever flourishing, simply so that we can say, “I told you so!”

This can be true for world or national politicians, but it can also be true for individuals who maybe are say, trying to eat healthier, lose weight, take part in regular exercise, forgive a longstanding hurt, develop a relationship with a living Jesus, try to find a way into joining a Church community – ‘the birds’ that are within seek to spoil all such attempts both for ourselves and therefore for others almost irrespective of age or background, often with catastrophic effects all for a moment of being able to say, “I told you so. Told you it couldn’t/wouldn’t grow!”

Of course, there are ‘other birds’ to – injustice, greed, self-interest, a willingness to ‘overlook’ the little people – take the people of Grenfell in amongst everything else that has been happening this week. Four years on, still without either explanation or justice. Recommendations from independent enquiries overturned by politicians because of the uncomfortableness of the implications and how it will affect ‘business’ and ‘profit-margins.’

May Jesus’ image of the Kingdom as “Salvadora Persica” be a wake up call that He will not rest until His Kingdom does prevail, particularly for the impoverished and for the voiceless.

But so too with us. Are we someone who seeks to see all the problems in things, all the faults, all that is not right? Do we, whether out of hurt and pain or out of a desire to improve our self-esteem in our own eyes, act in our own lives and the lives of those around us like ‘the birds,’ justifying to ourselves that ‘we are in the right?’

What would it look like to take Jesus’ words and Parable seriously? To try to see the possibility in things and in people, and to seek to take all our skills and efforts and apply them to seeking to helping them or the project to flourish? What would it look like if we were to allow God’s love, God’s Kingdom, to grow rampant and ever deeper across the

whole of our lives bringing healing where there is hurt, bringing hope and possibility where there is despair?

Maybe our prayer could be, “Lord, may You grant us the gift and generosity of Your Holy Spirit that we may be willing to trust and let You plant the seed of Your Kingdom, however small, once again in us. Help us to see the world, those around us, ourselves, and all Creation with the same rampant generosity and through Your eyes. Amen”

Matthew Thomson

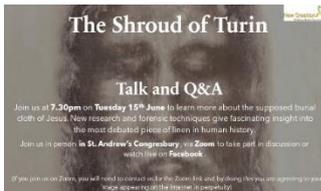


Worship: Next Sunday – Sunday 20th June at 10.30am will be in Congresbury – Sermon Series: Questions for today’s Church?”

The question this week sent in will be: “Do you need to be baptised to go to Church?” And although this would seem, at first, to have a very simple answer, the whole subject raises important questions around, acceptance, inclusion, difference, God’s grace and what being a Church community actually means.

So, thank you for sending these questions in and we would love to receive others. If you would like to ask a question you can do so either in writing, by email or the website, or by dropping in to either of the Churches or the Church Office.

Something different for the Summer: “Second talk on the Latest Research into the Turin Shroud, how it was formed and what it represents” – Tuesday 22nd June at 7.30pm in Congresbury Church, also via Zoom and Livestreamed.



Last Tuesday (15th June), following a general introduction we looked at the whole issue of the possible history of the Shroud from recent research tracing its history back through art and writings into certainly the 6th century (500’s) if not quite possibly before.

This week (Tuesday 22nd) we will look more at the forensic and scientific aspects of recent research into the Shroud and explore what these might have to say to us and to towards the question: could this possibly be the Burial and Resurrection cloth of Jesus?

You would be very welcome to join us if you would like to, and you can ‘catch-up on both last week’s talk and this week’s online via the website or Facebook.

If you would like to join in you can do so either physically in Congresbury Church, or via Zoom (simply contact Georgina Walker or Kirsty Bowles by emailing: georginawalker1994@gmail.com or kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk in order to get the link details, or the session will be Livestreamed over Facebook Live – as we have done with Sunday services)

Do you have a heart for pastoral care?

Have you got an hour a month to spare?

We are looking at expanding our pastoral care team after the lockdown restrictions ease. If you feel that you could spare a little time once a month to visit people in your parish for a chat and a catch up we would love to hear from you. If you feel you might be able to help be able to offer help or for more information help please leave your name and phone number on the office phone 01934 833126 or email

lisa.stannard@newcreationchurches.org.uk. Thank you.

New Creation
Building Better Community

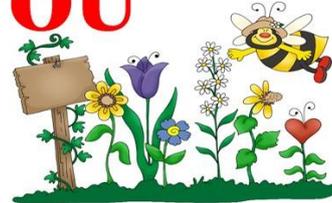


Do you enjoy gardening?

Do you have a spare hour or two to spare?

WE NEED YOU

In Congresbury we would love some help to keep the prayer garden and gardens around the refectory tidy. Whether you want to take on a flower bed or would just be happy to do a bit of weeding, pruning or even painting of benches, we would love you to join our small dedicated group of people who help to keep the church grounds looking Beautiful for everyone to enjoy. For more information, please leave a message in the church office, **01934 833 126** or on the answer machine for **Rosemary Bailey** and she will contact you with more details.



In Banwell we have smaller grounds, but have a few projects that we would love to tackle to keep them looking beautiful. If you fancy joining in, please email Churchwarden

Kirsty Bowles

kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk

or leave a message with the Office.

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Thank you.

Matt Thomson