

SERMON – 30/7/23**'Growth'**

Matthew 13:31-35 and 51-52

Jesus said, "Every teacher of the Law who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of heaven is like a householder who takes new and old things out of their storage room." (Matthew 13:52)

It is one of the distinctives of the ministry of Jesus that He often taught using parables. Almost everyone who has ever had any Christian teaching will be able to tell you one of the stories Jesus told. He takes visible things, tangible things, experiential things in order to reveal eternal truths to us, and people of all generations have been gripped by them. It has to be said, though, that, rather like a children's address where many remember the action but few actually remember the point (and as the prophet Isaiah foretold) many people who listen to Jesus' parables do not hear, many look but do not see. Yes, the parables of Jesus are memorable but sometimes we do not allow them to have their full impact. So as disciples of Jesus today, whether we have old messages reinforced to us or entirely new messages revealed to us as we open the store-room of God's Word together this morning, let us be open to the possibility that God will speak into our particular circumstances.

As I took the dog for a walk yesterday there were three different parts of the walk where I noticed large crops of wild raspberries in the hedgerows, and of course I picked and ate some – they were amazingly big for wild rasps, probably because of this year's early warmth and the more recent rains. Needless to say I was picking pips out of my teeth for the rest of the walk but it made me think. Each one of these pips is a seed and in each one of those seeds there is the potential to grow a new cane which will bear fruit in future years – the opportunity for abundant growth is staggering and is replicated in all kinds of ways in the natural world – from the ear of corn to the dandelion head, from salmon roe to human ovaries, in everything from stem cells to the viral load in a sneeze. Growth is there in the DNA of all things.

We have read two parables this morning which essentially make the same point, namely that when you take something that God

has endowed with the potential to accomplish something and you do with it what He intended, then the results are extraordinary. It is an extraordinary thing in the physical realm – one person takes a mustard seed a millimetre in diameter and sows it in their field and a mustard bush can grow to six feet in a season, big enough for birds to roost in; another person takes some yeast and mixes it with flour to make a dough which will rise – the point is that however much bread you are making you only need a small amount of yeast in comparison with the flour that makes up the bulk of the dough. It's amazing. And just as it is in the physical realm, so Jesus says it is also in the spiritual realm. The Kingdom of heaven is like this – a person with a mustard seed, a person with some yeast.

The image is very simple and easy to remember, but the question is whether we actually take it on board and allow it to have an impact on the living out of our faith. It's worth taking note of one significant detail in each of the parables that we might easily miss – the mustard seed has to be *sown* and the yeast has to be *mixed* with the other ingredients or the potential cannot be fulfilled.

In God's Kingdom we have each been given gifts and opportunities to use in the outworking of the Lord's purposes and though we may think they are small or insignificant, if we take what God has endowed with potential and do with it what God has intended, then the results will be astonishing and the transformation will be as remarkable as a tiny mustard seed becoming a huge bush, big enough for birds to nest in, or as a sprinkling of yeast causing a batch of dough to rise.

Jesus is saying that just as the potential of a bush or a tree is there when you hold a single seed in your hands or the potential of a batch of bread is there if you have a sprinkling of yeast and some flour, so the Kingdom of God is here already, just waiting for us to take whatever of its ingredients God has placed in our hands and to follow His lead with them.

Some of you may remember me speaking of the remarkable experience I had in Ethiopia nearly 10 years ago now seeing how with advice from Tearfund self-help groups among the poorest of the poor took the pennies and ha'pennies and the farthings they

could put aside week by week and invested together in setting up small businesses run by group members and enabling them to be increasingly self-sufficient. It led to the transformation of whole communities and in at least one case a whole city of quarter of a million people. Look! The kingdom of heaven.

In the most basic of ways each one of us can advance God's Kingdom by taking simple acts of kindness or words of encouragement and prayerfully sowing seeds that in God's hands will bear abundant fruit. And deeper and deeper into the spiritual realm we can go, taking the particular abilities God has given each one of us – the gift of speaking, or the ability to listen, a yearning to pray for others or the gift of time to spend alongside those who need help – and mixing them like yeast into the living of our lives until by the Spirit of God there is the new life and growth and fruit with joy and peace and justice that are the hallmarks of the Kingdom.

Here this week a large team of people from our own congregation and from our sister churches will be sowing seed and sprinkling yeast as we unleash Family Week on the community once again. The precious seed of God's Word will be sown in this place and in the various other buildings around the town where groups will be meeting – simple stories that unfold God's purposes and offer a glimpse of the Kingdom will take root in young lives with the potential to bear wonderful fruit. Like the mustard seed growing into a bush or tree big enough for birds to nest in, so the Gospel is able to build a spiritual temple in which new people, young and old, can find a place to belong and to believe. Like yeast having a transformative effect in a batch of dough, so the interaction of God's messengers with the children and young people and families who will be involved this week can have a life-changing impact for good and for growth.

But while the message is clear enough in the context of a week of conscious outreach like Family Week, it is also a message we need to take on board even if we are not involved in Family Week and that we all need to be putting into practice the other 51 weeks of the year too. Every single one of us is entrusted with spiritual seed and yeast every single day, and if the potential of what God has given to us is to be unleashed and fulfilled we have

to sow that seed and sprinkle that yeast in the course of what we do day by day.

I have often said that there is no comparison between what can be accomplished by one person giving a sermon to a hundred people in the course of one hour once a week and what those hundred people can accomplish in the course of the other 167 hours that week (this week) among the thousands of people with whom we will collectively have to do. We may feel that the one tiny expression of God's message that we might be able to share will never change anything or that our apparently insignificant presence as Christians in the context of wider society will have no appreciable impact, but if the seed is never planted there will never be a tree and if the yeast is never sprinkled the dough will never rise.

So what will you do this week? Let me invite each one of you to pause and consider what might be the equivalent of the mustard seed or the yeast that God has put in your hands today.

Whatever it may be, it is something that has the potential in God's purposes to bring growth. It doesn't have to be something grand or even overtly spiritual – in fact, the simpler the better because in a way that will demonstrate most powerfully of all that it is *God* who brings the increase – just take what you have, whatever comes to mind, and do with it what God leads you to. You could offer a random act of kindness to someone – a friend or neighbour or complete stranger – you may never know the outcome but you have planted a seed and God will bring the increase. You could share the simplest expression of gratitude for what God has done for you or what the Gospel means to you, you could ask someone if there is anything they would like you to pray about for them, or you could offer an invitation to something in the life of the church. What will God do with that? You could spend a few minutes each day praying specifically for one person – just wait and see what God will do with that!

Whether this sermon is a reminder to you of something you first heard a long time ago or whether this is something completely new, God's Word is living and active. The kingdom of heaven is like this – a tiny seed is planted and a tree grows and birds find a place to nest; yeast is mixed with flour and a batch of dough

rises. The ingredients of God's Kingdom are in our hands – the Gospel, faith, love, hope. Let's realise the potential of those things right where we are this week and let's rejoice in the growth of the Kingdom just as we rejoice in the raspberries in the hedgerows or a newly-baked batch of bread.