



Trinity 3

THE NEW SHOFAR

Men and women sow the seeds but God does the growing

Ezekiel 17:22-24 - Mark 4:26-34

Your Kingdom Come...i.e. Set up your Kingdom God!

Mark offers his readers two parables about the growth of the Kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus. His point is how the process of growing wheat remains mysterious, known to God alone. This first parable of the secretly growing seed is found only in the Gospel of Mark and its fundamental message arises out of the way the seed grows as a simile for the way God grows the Kingdom.

Jesus seems to go out of his way to make sure the farmer plays very little part in the process of producing a harvest. He scatters the seed but then does nothing. He sleeps and then rises from his bed. This he does day by day until the crop is ready. There is no mention of the many daily works of a farmer – weeding, watering, the battle with locusts, dry weather and so on. This is deliberate. What happens after sowing is out of the hands of the farmer. How things unfold through till harvest time remains a mystery to him – just as the science of agriculture remained a mystery to all of the people of the time.

The saving activities of God never cease

The verb for the sowing of the seed is in a grammatical form making it clear this sowing is a one-off action. It is sown. The other verbs are very different. They are in the present tense, a form of the verb indicating how what is happening is continuous...*sleeping, rising, sprouting and growing* and then all over again, *sleeping, rising, sprouting and growing*. It is going on at all of the time without ceasing. These verbs are important as they help keep the readers focus on where the main responsibilities are to be found. The farmer does nothing but sleep and rise from his bed. While he does nothing in the garden, the seed grows. Ultimately the crop grows through the work of God and nothing else, no one else.

Christians are collaborators in the works God is doing in the world

This does not mean that disciples play no part in the spread of the Kingdom. They are the ways through whom God grows the Kingdom. The growth itself comes from God. We know from normal farming that the farmer needs to do a great deal of work as the crop grows but trying to apply this to the parable would be to go beyond what Mark is saying. There is much the disciple needs to do in Kingdom growing, but in the end, the producing of fruit comes from God.

There is Mark's point – without the faithful engagement of Christians, God will still grow his Rule on earth. In this way the Kingdom stands out in stark contrast to groups like the zealots who sought to establish God's Rule on earth through political means, through their own efforts and cunning military plans. These all failed. Jesus calls upon disciples to collaborate in what he continues to do in the world with collaboration meaning *do our bit* and not try to play God. The evangelist reminds his Church of the importance of living as one with Christ so that God can grow what we have sown.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

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Why was Mark writing this message?

Mark was writing at a time of struggle for the Church. The Roman wars had just crushed all Jewish resistance, the Temple had been destroyed and the Christians had been expelled from the synagogues. As persecution grew and the Church had its first martyrs, it comes as no surprise to find the evangelist needing to address a fundamental question: *if the Kingdom is already here, then where is it to be seen and experienced?* Surely the divine victory of God over the forces of evil would mean living in a world where darkness no longer had a place; a world where peace, joy, harmony and love reigned?

It is an eternal question and a part of the answer Mark gives can be seen in the way the evangelist portrays the Twelve in his Gospel. They remain unknowing, confused, in fear of their own lives and completely unsuitable for the missionary task. And yet, says Mark, the ministry of Jesus was successful. The Kingdom was inaugurated. As the Book of Acts highlights, under the Spirit, the Church grew and spread *to the ends of the earth*. A persecuted Church; a Church struggling for survival; a Church at work out in the world will grow and spread – and here is the point – in proportion to its faithfulness to the commands of Christ Jesus. Ignorance, opposition, support and encouragement were neither helps or hindrances to what God was doing. The work of the Kingdom was not tied to human acceptance or rejection. Like the farmer in the parable, the ways of the Kingdom are not known to men and women. Give God even half a chance and the fruit will be produced in an abundance.

If God is doing the growing, why are our pews so empty?

It is not difficult to imagine Mark's answer to this question. "These things remain a mystery" he would say, "but there are things we can be doing and should be doing". He would not countenance the idea of sitting back and letting God get on with things. God doing the growing does not mean we do not have to try things, experiment with new ways of evangelism or challenge the world in which we live with Gospel priorities. Today's Gospel is a similitude and not an agricultural document on the science of wheat farming. In reality, the farmer has to do a great deal more than going to bed and sleeping. Jesus knew this, just as Mark knows disciples have to do much more than sit around waiting for God to take an initiative. He would wryly suggest our pews are emptying because we have taken the farmer's actions too literally and are spending too much time in bed (in our own parish community) and not enough time out in the paddocks (the society in which we are called to ministry).

If God could bring resurrection out of the crucifixion of his Son, then there are mysterious forces at work that will forever remain a mystery to us. The consequences of this teaching is the way believers are being drawn closer and closer to Jesus. When faced with trials and tribulations, uncertainties, doubts, fears and pain, God is at work among those living in his Son. It is not necessary to understand clearly the way God is working or how God is going to bring a positive out of what seems to be an impossible situation. What faith does is bring hope, peace, strength and courage and galvanizes us to action. To believe that God is working, continually working, at work growing the Kingdom in us, through us and even at times despite us, is what makes persevering in faithfulness possible.

A Gospel conclusion: More of the same, when it comes to matters of parish life or Christian living is not going to work. It is like a farmer planting seeds in the same paddock year after year without doing anything to restore its fertility. The crop will diminish to the point it is no longer a viable farm. Church communities need to be ever refreshing itself in the Spirit, growing holier under God by a closer imitation of the life and witness of Jesus Christ. Christians and their pastoral workers need to hit the streets, knock on doors, visit the sick, bury the dead, initiate new pastoral programmes and fly the Kingdom "flag" at all times. Then and only then can we expect God to do the growing.

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