



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

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2nd Sunday after Trinity

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Reflection

I'm very much a city person. I've lived most of my life in apartments, with little, if any, opportunity to grow anything but potted plants. As a child, I delighted in planting beans in a little soil and watching them grow within a few days. I cannot remember a single occasion when I failed. Those little things are certainly equipped with a drive to germinate and grow! All they need is a bit of water to give them impetus.

But here ends the story of my plant growing success. I am sure many of you have green fingers. Not me. Seeds, smaller or bigger, pips, pits, plant cuttings, bulbs – they all resist my tender loving care. I am pleased and grateful when someone brings me a potted plant and pray that it will survive until their next visit. Proof of my good will and dedication.

There are, however, a number of plants in my apartment, and some of them have been there for several years. Though I cannot claim I have looked after them well. When I forget to water them or I am away for as long as a week, they seem to thrive. When I am around and pamper them, they look utterly bored and invite an excessive variety of pests to keep them company and to confront me with the moral conundrum of exterminating the beasties.

Therefore, I take great comfort in the two parables of the Kingdom that Jesus told his disciples: the earth produces of itself, seeds sprout and grow while the sower sleeps and rises, and a tiny seed morphs into the greatest of all shrubs. A gardener's dream comes true. And yet this is counter-cultural for professional gardeners and even for part-time ones! So, what does Jesus mean when he says that the planter does not know how all this happens? It is important to follow the biological development of the seed, the process of germination, and also to facilitate and to manage it. We all want to plan outcomes, to be in control! We want to understand how things work and to take action accordingly.

Jesus' parables cannot but clash with our philosophy of life. He tells parables not for explanation, but for exploration. Not for answers, but to engage with imagination, and to re-order conventional assumptions and values. They provide a rich and powerful lesson, not

always easy to discern. Indeed, God uses symbols to address us, and the Western mind has lost much of its understanding of symbolic language and the appreciation of it through an obsession with clear-cut and efficient structures.

We have, probably, also lost much of the sense of wonder that people who listened to Jesus two thousand years ago had. They could hold the paradoxical elements of the parables, as they bowed down before the miracles in their daily life. Where we analyse the activity of the metabolic machinery of a dormant seed resulting in its germination, they have seen the mystery of life out of death, and miracle upon miracle in the growth of a seedling and its developing into a large shrub.

Let us suppose that a parable of a plant developing out of the tiniest whisper of a beginning, could provide a worthy image for the growth of God's Kingdom: don't you think that a mustard plant is a rather diminutive metaphor? It seems to easily rime with hiddenness and insignificance. On the other hand, Ezekiel's poetic vision about the restoration of a Davidic kingdom as a tender sprig that becomes a noble cedar has greatness and solemnity. Perhaps that is exactly what Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom that has drawn near calls for. It's a theme that breathes through all of Mark's Gospel.

No doubt, a shrub, as sizeable as it may be, is lowlier and less majestic than a cedar. Yet remember that the greatness of God's reign will be established through humility and lowliness: it stoops to wash feet, it kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up not on a throne, but on a cross. A kingdom of power in weakness, of greatness in meekness.

By now, we have well understood, that this kingdom is not a static place, yet the dynamic reality of God's presence and power within the creation and within the lives of God's people. The parables in Mark's Gospel do not promise its unhindered progress. But they insist that the new order Jesus announces through his words and deeds will not be confined to certain spheres. Tiny seeds are easily carried by the wind, so the plant will grow where it will.

We have learned to genetically alter the seed, so that it is healthier and more resilient, so that it grows more easily and produces more. We have sophisticated resources to till the earth, test the soil, keep weeds and pests at bay. How does the reign of God grow? How does it sprout and flourish in the life of an individual person, or a church, or in the community and the world around us? If only we could figure that out, we could break it down into a process and form a strategy. The frame of reference we live in is about having long-term plans and goals, allocating resources, assessing results. Can we bring in the kingdom of God by our planning and striving? "The earth produces of itself", and the seed grows, we don't know how. Here we have a subtle reminder of God's hidden presence and power for those who like to take things into their own hands. Let God be in charge!

In our increasingly inhospitable world, how comforting it is to know that a humble mustard plant grows to provide space and opportunity for life to develop. Only God, the generous Host of us all, can offer, in his all-embracing gentleness, the shade of a shrub as a home for birds of all feathers. How many are longing to hear such an invitation today? 1% of the world's population have fled their homes as a result of persecution or conflict, and many more because of poverty, natural disaster, political unrest gang violence or other serious circumstances – where is the place of comfort and rest for them? The lowly shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home.

We need to be careful not to read these parables as indicating a promise for the growth of the Church throughout the ages. The reign of God does not carve out a separate sacred space – it claims all aspects of human existence. Nevertheless, the church should be a sign of the Kingdom in the world, and its own growth should be in truth, love, justice and hospitality, not in numbers. If the Church doesn't provide sanctuary, sustenance, and renewal to those who need it, like little birds, then it is not the Gospel of the Kingdom that it preaches.

The secrecy and hiddenness that accompany the gospel of the Kingdom are no invitation to despair. Don't be surprised if the seeds we are given to plant look ineffective. We cannot make the kingdom happen by force of will. The ultimate emergence of the reign of God does not depend on our ingenuity.

These are parables of hope and promise, leading us to confess God's reign in the world and to share in its blessings. We should always be confident that God is working even when we are not looking, in ways that are mysterious and profound. We have to walk not by sight, yet by faith – faith that God is in the tiny seeds of life he scatters in the world and makes them grow.

And we should ceaselessly pray in a way that acknowledges and proclaims God's creative, redeeming and restoring presence: "Thy kingdom come!"