

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday after Trinity

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All Saints' Marseille

Canon Alan Amos

For the first time in Mark's Gospel Jesus sits down! Deliberately, this provides quite a contrast with the breathless pace – with all those 'immediatlys' – of the first chapters of the Gospel. Jesus sitting down is a signal that a new stage in the Gospel, a new phase in Jesus' ministry, has now been reached. If you look at the previous chapter you can see that Jesus' cure of the man with a withered hand on the sabbath (3.1-6) leads to a sort of climax. The religious and political leadership of the day are now determined to work together to get rid of Jesus by any means. At that point we could almost move 'fast forward' to the account of Jesus' passion. But we don't – because first of all Jesus has some important things he needs to teach his disciples, and Mark encourages us, his readers, to look over the disciples' shoulders and learn or re-learn these lessons for ourselves too. Of course, compared with the disciples we have the privilege of knowing how the story of Jesus and our salvation is to unfold. Yet there will be some surprises, and quite a lot of learning for us on the way, too.

And here in chapter 4 is where the serious learning begins. Parables, we know, are one of the main ways in which Jesus teaches people. In fact, Mark tells us that 'Jesus did not speak to the crowd except in parables'. And this chapter, itself sometimes called 'the parable chapter of Mark', begins with the parable of the sower - a parable which in a way provides the key to the parables – indeed to the ministry of Jesus as a whole. It tells us that parables are like seeds: they fall in many places, and many may hear them, but not all respond to the word and produce the necessary fruit.

But notice where Jesus is, when he tells these parables. If you translated the Greek of verse one absolutely literally, it says that Jesus 'got into a boat and sat on the sea'. Back in the Old Testament we can read in the Psalms how the Lord God sits enthroned on the sea, and his voice thunders over the mighty waters

(Psalm 29.1-11). For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, a connection is being made here between Israel's God and this Galilean teacher, even though the throne from which he presides over the bringing about of God's reign is a small fishing boat. It is no accident that this chapter concludes by telling us how Jesus stills a storm out at sea, amazing the disciples and prompting their fearful question, 'Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?' (4.35-41)

As we stand on the seashore listening to Jesus – we find ourselves placed on an important threshold. One writer puts it: the seashore in Mark is 'the boundary between the human world of land, the ordered life of town and country, of business and religion, of seeds and lamps and vineyards, and the demonic world of sea, the lawless haunt of monsters, storms and destructive depth... And the point that Mark is making [in setting this key teaching chapter] "by the sea", is that if we want to receive the mystery of the Kingdom of God, we must go to that boundary, to that threshold. It is natural for us to want a way of salvation that begins in our familiar city or village without disturbing our settled life. But that is not possible if we are to be true followers of Jesus. We may not be called ourselves to give up all security and to set sail on the fearsome and uncontrollable waters whipped up by the wind or the spirit (in Hebrew the word for wind and spirit is the same, *ruah*) – though through the ages that has been the calling of a number of the great saints of God – but at least we need to stand on the seashore and allow our faces to be caressed by the sea breeze, and splattered by the spray. It is only at this point, where God's mysterious depths meet the domestic world of human beings, that the secret of the Kingdom can begin to be seen and shared.

The word 'parable' is an Anglicised version of a Greek word which means 'thrown alongside'. We find a close neighbour to the word parable in the mathematical term ***parabola***. Visually we can think of the sea shore as the place where the sea is thrown alongside the land – so it is perhaps therefore the ideal place for parables, Jesus' most characteristic teaching, where a vibrant image of the Kingdom is thrown alongside the everyday life of those who are listening to the words. Just as the ebb and flow of the waves repeatedly covers and uncovers the ground on which we are standing, so that gradually we are soaked, refreshed and revived, so also with parables, as we allow them to wash over us again and again we discover ourselves being changed and being given new eyes for seeing.

Our Gospel reading today brings us two parables, about the one who sows seed on the ground, and is amazed at how it grows. And the parable of the mustard seed and its mighty growth.

These two parables are often thought about as parables about the mission of the church, and the church is often identified as the kingdom about which Jesus is speaking. That identification has its problems, when we look at church history. More properly, the church is the herald of the kingdom, bringing into the present a foretaste of the kingdom which in its fullness is still to come. But in this world of today, I like to look at these two parables in a different way, and to see them as parables of hope. Hope is certainly in short supply, as we look around us, whether in Europe, or to the Middle East. There are two major death-dealing conflicts going on, neither of which can easily be resolved. Human beings are seen at their worst. Where then is hope? Let me suggest that hope is found in the seed. And that the message of Jesus for us is that despite everything which might well make us despair, the seed will prevail and bring abundant life to be shared without discrimination. If we identify the seed with hope, hope which itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit, then it is something which can be hidden from us which only the future will fully reveal. We look around, and we see little of hope. But the future belongs to God and to the Kingdom of God. I think of the seeds of hope as those wonderful people who in their own lives turn away from the hatred of others, from the hatred of those that their political leaders urge them to hate and to destroy. I see the seeds of hope in those who still recognise the face of brother or sister in those who are supposed to be their enemy. These are the people who are in themselves the seed of hope, and to whom in God's providence the future belongs. Yes they seem to be insignificant and very small in number. But they are real, and they exist, and stand among us carrying their few loaves and fishes to provide for the needs of humanity. They are the true workers who work to bring in the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we need to recognise these bearers of the seed in every age, for they stand among us as people of resurrection hope. I picked up a small book in Geneva recently by Simone Weil, the woman who was in Auschwitz with her family and then became a leading French politician. In this book in which she is interviewed during the last years of her life, she recalls her mother in the prison camp, how she never ceased to care for others, but also never ceased to hope for a time when France and Germany might be reconciled. Her mother saw clearly that the future wellbeing of all depended on such a reconciliation and a healing of relationship.

Today, despite all the noise of hatred and destruction, there are those who stand against hatred and carry the torch for the future. They are like the seed of Abraham, that messenger of faith, from whom God raised up peoples of faith and peoples of hope. And we find hope today in Jesus the seed, who embraced suffering and death to give life to all. As we follow the stories in the gospels, the stories of good news in Christ, may the power of the Holy Spirit rekindle the spirit of hope within us. And may we have eyes to see the action of God among us, in those whom he continues to raise up. And so I conclude with a short poem.

I need the God of the here and now,
Not of the there and then,
The breaking open of the present moment
Into light
Into sight
Emmaus time again.

Amen.