

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg (Creationtide)

Preached by Evelyn Sweerts on 30 September 2018

Text: Ecclesiastes 3.1-8; Mark 4.26-32

This well-known reading from Ecclesiastes has an abiding popularity because it rings true to human experience. Framed by birth and death, our lives do indeed contain laughter and tears, mourning and dancing. In fact, sometimes the 'seasons' switch so fast we get emotional whiplash. An accident, an illness, a death can all throw us from one state to another – and yet people laugh at wakes.

This passage from Ecclesiastes is a beautiful and poetic way of stating the obvious. What's really key is the phrase: under heaven. This is how things are on earth, now. But just because they are that way doesn't necessarily mean that's how things ought to be.

The parables in Mark's gospel hint at what could be, and how. Besides both being about seeds and growth, they are linked in that they have things to say about the breaking in of God's reign 'under heaven' – in other words, on earth and in our lives. In fact Mark's Gospel is all about kingdom of God. But the kingdom is not about a place; it is about God's presence and power within the creation and within the lives of God's people.

Mark's good news is that in Jesus and his ministry, God's presence and rule have taken on a new dimension and power among us. Jesus' parables give us a window into what that might look like and in particular the image of the seed – so small, and yet pregnant with possibility – has much to teach us about how God's reign will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Firstly, just like seeds, the kingdom grows of its own accord and not by human effort. When Jesus says that the earth produces 'of itself' the word is the one we get automatically from. We do not know or understand how it comes and it is not of our doing. Likewise the mustard seed becomes a bush without human intervention. Jesus thus offers a counter-weight to arrogant human

efforts and programmes for 'making' the kingdom come. We can no more make things grow than we can make God's reign come on earth.

However, this doesn't let us off the hook and mean we do nothing. Someone, after all, must do the scattering. It's a matter of trusting God for the outcome. The growth is the work of God; the harvest is a gift. And therein lies the encouragement: we may not see the growth or the harvest, and our scattering in the form of loving God and neighbour, or preaching with our words and our lives, may seem to be in vain, effecting no change, but we can be confident that God is doing something.

And therein lies a second important theme: what is hidden will be revealed. The potential of the seed cannot be seen by simply looking at the seed: the truth of what it could be is hidden. Likewise once planted the seed does things out of sight. Things happen underground that we cannot see and are not aware of until suddenly a green blade rises from the dark soil. The kingdom grows in a hidden and mysterious way. The work of the Holy Spirit is visible only in its effects. No matter how much detail scientists provide about how seeds become plants there will forever be something wondrous about the mechanisms. Likewise the kingdom – even as it is gradually revealed – retains an element of mystery. We will never fully get it and capture it.

It takes time for seeds to germinate, become seedlings, and then grow into mature plants. We should not expect an immediate harvest or overnight home for birds – in this the Teacher of Ecclesiastes was right for both ordinary human life on earth and for the kingdom of God as it breaks into our lives here and now. There is a season for sowing, a season for waiting and trusting, a season for witnessing and perhaps nurturing growth, and a season for nesting or harvest.

Seeds start small, and become so much more than can be pictured when we look at them. Likewise the kingdom starts from tiny seeds and becomes more than can be imagined: a harvest, or a shrub large enough for birds to nest. Jesus' seed parables, especially that of the mustard seed, suggest that the

kingdom is not built through grand programmes and projects. Instead, it starts very small.

There is a lowliness to God's kingdom that runs counter to earthly conceptions of power. The images evoked in this passage are not of the overwhelming glory of the throne in heaven but are instead rooted in ordinary soil and the peaceful beauty of resting birds. I once saw a series of photos which were all of weeds growing in unexpected places – camomile bursting through concrete – and it seems to me that this is perhaps what the kingdom of God is sometimes like. Not so much prize roses in carefully managed gardens as poppies among the wheat and grasses in the cracks of a stairwell in a council estate.

There is also a dramatic difference between what is sown and what emerges. The things that start the kingdom, as it were, do not look like the kingdom. That's actually quite astonishing, and could mean we miss the moments when the kingdom is being sown. We might be on the lookout for things that look like how we imagine the kingdom to be: the fruit of the Spirit, or social or economic justice, or care for the environment. But maybe those things are not the start of the kingdom at all, but its seedlings. To be nurtured, for sure – but not actually the moment of sowing.

Supremely Jesus' death was a kingdom seed yet at the time it seemed a sign of failure, and this despite Jesus having told his disciples what to expect using the image of a seed! In John's Gospel he says to them: Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. This should make us cautious about thinking we can find, label and track the kingdom of God and its growth.

The image of the seed shows us that the kingdom of God grows of itself, not through our efforts; it does not look like how it starts; and is not made of grand projects but has a lowly, earthy quality. It takes time to grow and develop, but eventually what is hidden – the potential of the seed and its germination underground – is revealed in our lives and in the whole of creation.

Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection and by the work of the Spirit, God's presence and activity in our lives and in the whole of creation is both a reality and a promise, a gift we both receive and participate in, a reign that is both hidden and revealed, an actuality that can be experienced yet remains mysterious. As simple and as complex as a seed that grows, the kingdom of God is, frankly, amazing. I wonder what it is that we will go out and sow. And will we be open to it being planted in our lives?