Sermon for 11th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5:-6:10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

i

Not everything is as it seems. Like the iceberg which shows just a small portion of itself above the waves, so too the work of God is largely hidden from our eyes.

Mark’s parable of the seed growing secretly seeks to offer an antidote against both impatience and discouragement. To the zealot type of would-be disciple who wanted to take Jesus there and then to make him their king, this parable urges due patience. For those suffering from discouragement at the opposition the gospel generates, or the fact that so many would-be disciples do not stay the course, the parable counsels hope.

We know so much more today about the biology of plant growth. In many western nations we are accustomed to fruitful harvests and efficient agriculture. To feel the impact of this parable we have to use our imagination to place ourselves back in time when farmers did not understand the miracle of growth, when there could be no guarantee of a harvest in those semi-arid Near Eastern countries.

In such times, it was an act of faith to sow your seed upon the ground. Famine was never far away. How desperately hungry might you have been when faced with the choice – do you eat your seed corn in order to stay alive in the short term, or throw it away onto the field in the hope that a greater harvest will come in the future?

To the people of Jesus’ day, every harvest was a miracle of God’s providence – perhaps it still is, but today we put it down to good agri-business. The thrust of the parable in Jesus’ day is the utter reliability of God to produce a harvest.

Once the seed is sown and the grain starts to grow, the process is inevitable; it will grow to maturity and harvest. The farmer neither understands the process, nor controls it, nor is the process dependent upon his actions. All the farmer is required to do is have the faith to sow the seed and then the patience to leave God to send the growth.

The parable of the mustard seed furthers this line of thinking by contrasting the small and insignificant beginnings of a tiny mustard seed with the final size of the plant produced. There is no obvious correlation. The mature plant is far, far greater in size than its seed. Therefore, we should not lose hope at the tiny steps we take for the gospel in our lives. They may seem too small to matter in our eyes and apparently so insignificant that we are tempted to give up. But the growth that mysteriously comes from God’s providential hand will turn our small efforts into a great harvest.

From the small band of disciples around a wandering preacher from Galilee, God has grown a world-wide faith community embracing every nation under the sun. This has been possible because men and women of faith have had the courage to play their small part in God’s cosmic drama. We sow and God sends the growth.

ii

Paul is making a similar point in his letter to the Corinthians. It is again a matter of keeping the longer view in mind. Earlier in the chapter, he is contrasting the present earthly ‘house’ or ‘tent’ with our heavenly ‘house’, as he seeks to contrast the present mortal state of believers with our future heavenly, immortal state. The Holy Spirit is our guarantee of that future glory (v5), not the end sum of that future glory itself.

As we join Paul’s argument in our reading today from verse 6, Paul is making the point that we still walk in faith of a future that we do not yet have; but we have confidence in that future because the Spirit is a foretaste or guarantee of that future.

Paul is trying to counter a way of thinking that had broken out in Corinth in the aftermath of the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit described in 1 Corinthians 12. The church in Corinth had been blessed with many spiritual gifts, including the impressive speaking in tongues, but this had given rise to the unfounded belief that the gift of the Holy Spirit signifies the end of the process. Now they have the Spirit there is nothing more to come, nothing more to await.

This had led some of the Corinthians to deny the resurrection. They have received it all in this life in the Spirit, so there is nothing more to wait for. But Paul says to those who doubt the resurrection, “If we have hoped in Christ for this life only, we are of all people the most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19).

This is because many, like Paul, will know much suffering in this life as a result of their faith; if you think you’ll get immediate and full reward for your efforts, you’re mistaken. You must stay for the long haul. In the short term your faith might give you more troubles than you have ever known. But the Spirit is the down payment of what will ultimately follow.

Paradoxically, the gift of the Spirit can lead some Christians to living a less spiritual life, not a more spiritual life, as it had done in Corinth. Since they now had the Spirit some were tempted to live according to their worldly flesh. After all, if God has given you all that there is to give, why keep on struggling to grow in righteousness?

This is why it is important, argues Paul, to consider the ultimate goal that is still to come: For we will still have to face judgement, even those who have received the Spirit in this life (2 Corinthians 5:10).

This is why Paul emphasises that the future goal of our life is resurrection life, that the gift of the Spirit, however dramatic, is not the end, but only a foretaste, and why we must live not according to our present worldly state, but in anticipation of the future resurrected state we hope to share with Christ. For this reason, every Christian should behave like, and be treated like a new creation. Present behaviour and expectations should be based in the here and now on a future that is still to be revealed.

iii

There are many useful lessons from these two parables and Paul’s remonstrations with the Corinthians which we can take to heart today.

Firstly, we can be encouraged to keep on for the long haul. We all have moments when we wonder whether, despite all the glories of the past, the Church may still die off and the whole Christian vision come to nothing. This is currently an anxiety experienced in the West. But like the seed that once germinated will one day produce a harvest, so too the kingdom of God is the work of God and its growth is in God’s hands. The harvest will come.

Secondly, we can be encouraged to do our bit, even in unfavourable times and even if we think our contribution is pathetically small. There is no correlation between the initial seed of a thing and the ultimate size of the tree. Play your part, sow your seed of the gospel, and leave the growth in God’s hands.

Thirdly, we should be warned against allowing our impatience to ruin our faith. Perhaps today more than at any time in history, we have become accustomed to instant results. The kingdom of God does not provide answers with the speed of Google. The harvest will come, but at harvest time, in God’s time, and not in ours. Patience is an essential ingredient in our faith; patience is an aspect of trusting God. Or do we lose our faith in God if he doesn’t satisfy our short-term desires for results?

Fourthly, it encourages us to boldness. We are assured God can and will send the growth. So when churches are tempted to hold on to their last assets, to take no risks, to try to eke out their congregational life just a bit longer before it all dies, we are encouraged to risk sowing the seed, despite our present hunger and fears. God makes seeds to grow.

Lastly, we should therefore not be too discouraged at the poor state of the Church. We are indeed a long way from what we are meant to become. This is not an excuse for laziness, but a counsel of comfort. The Church does some horrendously foolish things at times and we can feel embarrassed at the weak and incoherent witness our lives often give of the faith we proclaim, but the seed is as dramatically different from the ultimate tree it will produce as we are to the glory that will one day be ours.

Wesley’s contribution was to encourage people not to allow such a long term vision to lead them into spiritual torpor, but to stimulate them to personal and constant growth in holiness towards the end that has been revealed in Christ.

We may all still have a long way to go, but what matters is that we are still moving in the right direction.

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