

Like A Mustard Seed: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, 13 June 2021 (The Second Sunday after Trinity)

Readings – 2 Corinthians 5: 6–17; Mark 4: 26–34

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed...”

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I suspect many of you remember a BBC comedy series from a decade ago called *Rev.* For those of you who don't know it, it is about the trials and tribulations of an East End vicar, the Reverend Adam Smallbone, and his congregation in a gentrifying but still sometimes troubled parish. His flock isn't very large, and sometimes their motivations for being in church are frankly mixed, from the lady of a certain age who is, shall we say, often very taken with gentlemen in clerical collars, to the incoming middle-classes who turn up to get their children into the parish primary school, without remotely taking anything that goes on in Church seriously.

A consistent theme is Adam's sense of his own inadequacy. Adam feels inadequate compared with the vicar of the lively parish down the road, with its in-house rap artist and huge congregation of young people, and inadequate compared with his very clever pal from theological college who has a column in *The Guardian* and a regular slot on *Thought for the Day*. Yet every once in a while, an encounter happens that makes Adam realise that he is indeed called by God to be the person he is, moments of grace where only he, precisely because of his transparent flaws, can bring the light of Jesus Christ into a situation where a grander or more self-confident person would never be allowed to enter.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation”, says St Paul in today's Epistle reading, from the Second Letter to the Corinthians. It is natural to feel inadequate when faced with words like that. I don't know about you, but my

faults have remained persistent throughout my journey of faith. Following Jesus Christ as my Lord hasn't turned me into a heroic crusader against evil who makes sinners repent by the sheer radiance of my goodness. I am as flawed, as self-centred, as inclined to take the path of least resistance, and sometimes as plain annoying as I always have been.

Yet: "There is a new creation." This is where context matters, because St Paul wrote these words to a new and immature Church in Corinth, the Eastern Mediterranean's sin city, a city of sailors on shore leave joining the locals in hard partying and loose living. We might think of it in our terms as Amsterdam multiplied by Ibiza. Paul didn't write those letters to the Corinthians because they were the example of what a Church should look like, but because they were the most troubled of all the churches he established – sometimes immoral, obsessed with wealth and bling, and rather selfish. And yet St Paul didn't give up on them. They were at the beginning of a journey that they didn't even seem to understand: but they had made a start. Great things often have small beginnings, and the people who start them are never perfect. God called the Corinthians to follow Him in His Son Jesus Christ, not because they were the models of sainthood, but because they were the people He needed to fulfil his purposes, there and then.

So too, God made each of us here this morning and called us to follow Him as the people we are, as the people he made us to be, to fulfil those purposes of His that only we can fulfil. Yes, many of us are old, and perhaps we're a little old fashioned, maybe not as lively as some congregations, nor as burdened by a call to save the world as others. But, my brothers and sisters, God has called us to follow him in his son Jesus Christ, together here in St John's, for many reasons. This may seem a little unbelievable to us, but as St Paul wrote to that deeply flawed congregation in Corinth, we walk by faith and not by sight. We meet together and meet God in bread and wine; in due course, He will show us why.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, said Jesus to the crowds by the Sea of Galilee in our Gospel reading. Mustard seeds are tiny, only one or two millimetres in diameter. You could fit around 2,000 along the edge of the altar, literally millions of them piled on top of it. Yet, the mustard tree grows about as high as this pulpit, big enough to have birds nest in it. Parables have overlapping meanings, and many people preaching on this text will focus on the idea that tiny ideas, given the right care and time, can grow into relationships and projects that have a world-changing impact, giving life and nourishment to many. That is indeed the case.

Yet most mustard seeds never grow into a tree. That doesn't mean they are a wasted part of creation, for they feed the birds and the bugs and the worms and nourish the soil, sustaining the ecological balance.

Many of the messages we get from the world around us, especially in relation to the Church, condition us to think we and our ideas are unimportant or silly. Jesus says the Kingdom of God is different. It's about thousands of tiny little actions, most of which will only change the world in tiny ways; it's also a place where things that seemed to be failures will ultimately be revealed to be important contributions to building His Kingdom – like the mustard seeds that are eaten by the birds.

Michael Ramsey, considered by many to be the most pastoral and caring Archbishop of Canterbury of recent generations, said this to a group of priests about to be ordained fifty years or so ago, and it is applicable to all of us who seek to live as Jesus Christ wishes us to:

You may feel that your ministry seems so small, so insignificant, so concerned with the trivial. What a tiny difference it can make to the world that you should run a youth club, or preach to a few people in a church, or visit families with seemingly small result, but consider the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very few, the one man, one woman, one child, are of infinite

worth to God. ... For the infinite worth of the one is the key to the Christian understanding of the many.

Let nobody say after the last year that cleaning the Church doesn't matter, or making the coffee afterwards is something we can take for granted. Let nobody say that calling in on a friend when you're passing is a small thing, or having people round for a meal isn't something very important.

...

In conclusion, trust that you are a new creation, already at your baptism made new in Christ. You are not inadequate and we as a congregation are not inadequate, but instead called by God to help build His Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, in ways that only we can do. There are things that each of us individually here this morning can do to build God's kingdom, and things that only we as a congregation, and no other, can do.

One thing we know definitively that God has called us to do this morning is to break bread with Him and with one another, just as He did with the apostles in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us pray that we will now be fed through those holy mysteries, and having been nourished by them, to go out into the world to scatter the little seeds of goodness and love.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.