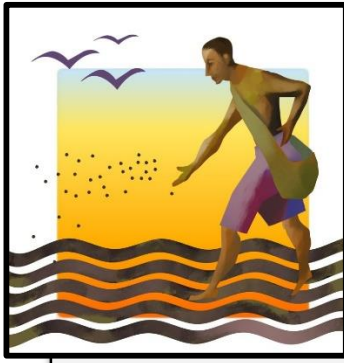


The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 16th June, 2024

" ... as if someone would scatter seed "



Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus teaches in parables...

Jesus also said, *'The kingdom of GOD is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'*

He also said, *'With what can we compare the kingdom of GOD, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'*

Contemporary Reading of Grace

John O'Donohue, "Morning Prayer"
From "To Bless the Space between us"

I arise today
Blessed by all things,
Wings of breath, delight of eyes,
Wonder of whisper, intimacy of touch
Eternity of soul, urgency of thought,
Miracle of health, embrace of GOD.

May I live this day
Compassionate of heart, clear of word,
Gracious in awareness, courageous in thought, generous in love.

Two parables. Hidden seed, and mustard seed.

And a really big gulf in technology and understanding, between us and the time and culture in which Jesus told these stories!

How do we hear them like his listeners did?

How do we hear in them, the truths which came to be written down decades later?

As we attend to these parables today, I'm going to invite us to forget - just for a bit - what we know about seed technology, and how seeds work. What we understand about soils, and fertilisers, and genetics etc.

Forget - just for a moment - our 21st century knowledge of mustard seeds, and mustard trees or bushes or creepers or weeds, or whatever they are...

... and enter into Jesus' world, if we can, and hear a little of what he might have been saying.

"*The kingdom of GOD*", said Jesus, "*is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground...*"

The image of sowing and harvest is one deeply present within the biblical tradition. Often it functions as a symbol of hope for GOD's future action. Sometimes it's a symbol for the 'seasons' of life and faith, a recognition that life has a timeliness to it. As the wonderful writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, the seasons exist beyond us, and everything has its season. Each season carries a promise: a promise that the next season will follow.

When '*those with ears*' listened to Jesus, they immediately had a sense of his context. This parable is about hope, and about the faithfulness of GOD from one season to the next. And so, when he began to talk about a mysterious and risky exercise - like putting seed in the ground and walking away for several months - they had in their experience and imagination a context in which to hear and interpret his story.

In the process we know as 'nature', Jesus found a way to speak of sacred mystery and the spirit of GOD: the creative, dynamic, life-giving life in the midst of all life. GOD: found deeply in relationship with humanity and all creation.

We can be a bit blasé about that if we're not careful. Scientific awareness notwithstanding, we need to be wary of losing our ability to wonder at nature, and the sacredness that's within it... and beyond!

The way Jesus tells the story, there's mystery in the seed's process. At the same time, though, the act of sowing is inextricably linked to the prospect of a harvest: to the belief that some creative process will take up what the sower begins. It's an invitation to hope!

Jesus draws his hearers back to their tradition, and their 'heart' stories of the faithfulness of GOD... to the covenant hope. But that's not the end of the story.

He goes on to talk about the mustard seed and what it goes on to become. And this is where we really have to suspend 21st Century knowledge!

The mustard seed isn't the smallest seed. Nor does it grow into a tree, or even a large shrub. Apparently the middle eastern version is more like a creeper – a weed, even!

But for Jesus, none of that is the point! (Although the idea of the mustard seed as a WEED is interesting... another time!) This is a story that speaks of how what we see now, is often different from what we will see.

These parables operate within understandings of resurrection, which are paralleled in many world cultures: hope for all people who see life as 'good', and inspiration to hold fast to hope. At its most basic level, there's a reassurance that life goes on, even when it changes in ways we wish it didn't.

What's important though, is the stories are not invitations to blinkered optimism that ignores reality: that ignores pain, death, and the futility that can sometimes overwhelm us.

They acknowledge the fragility, the risk, and vulnerability of life and death, and assert hope anyway. **More, they assert that that's where we truly find GOD: in the midst of that fragility and vulnerability!**

And they also acknowledge experience, as a reason for hope. The seed grew last year, so let's believe that it will again. The Way of GOD is about taking the risk to be vulnerable and real, in the faith that this is where we find the sacred processes of life, and GOD's Holy Spirit, to be most present.

I suspect that for Mark's story of Jesus, there's a sense of biography in this, or self-revelation perhaps. Investing his life in his view of GOD and the world, was a bit like scattering a seed. ("*unless a seed dies*", life does not come out of it.)

What about for us? For our story?

Well, vulnerability is unlikely to cost us our lives, but as Jesus' followers we've always been called to be a community that risks the way of faith:

- that sows seeds of faith regardless of whether they result in more Sunday seats being full,
- that helps its people sow, grow, and be, seeds of faith where we are each day,
 - that takes the risk to change how we sow seeds, because we sense the leading of GOD's spirit in a different direction.

Such change isn't new, I think we've always been in times of change.

And I think we get sick of being told "*well, we have to change*". I try to say instead, that we are changing, and that it's because that's the way of GOD, and because change - and vulnerability - is what happens when you're alive!

I'll be exploring this more next week in the context of the anniversary of the Uniting Church

In Jesus and his stories, we see one who took the risk to be vulnerable, and open to faith. Because he found GOD there! Even when others didn't.

Jesus and his stories - our stories - remind us that we don't sow in blind, unthinking, optimism.

We sow in the life of GOD's spirit, and we sow in hope of being part of a good harvest. That's a whole different thing altogether!

Listen! A sower went out to sow..."

Blessings, *Rod Peppiatt*