

Worshipping Together : Apart
Sunday 13th June 2021 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

A Call to Worship God

For your love that never changes

I praise you, Lord God.

For the miracle of growth

I praise you, Lord God.

For stories that tell of your love

I praise you, Lord God.

God of growth, help me to listen for your word

to understand your ways and to trust in your promises

Amen

Hymn – R&S 42: MP 153:

For the fruits of all creation, thanks be to God;

for his gifts to every nation, thanks be to God;

for the ploughing, sowing, reaping,

silent growth while we are sleeping,

future needs in earth's safe-keeping, thanks be to God.

In the just reward of labour, God's will is done;

in the help we give our neighbour, God's will is done;

in our world-wide task of caring

for the hungry and despairing,

in the harvests we are sharing, God's will is done.

For the harvests of the Spirit, thanks be to God;

for the good we all inherit, thanks be to God;

for the wonders that astound us,

for the truths that still confound us,

most of all, that love has found us, thanks be to God.

F. Pratt Green (1903-) © Stainer & Bell Ltd*

Approaching God in Prayer

God of surprises,
help me to find you in the hidden and the unexpected.
Help me to see you in the small actions that make a difference,
and to notice and discern your love at work
when your presence is hidden.
Help me, Lord God to know your life-giving power
so that I will be able to flourish and bear fruit in my own life.

God, who made our wonderful world,
with all its colour and growth; its fruits and flourishing:
I give thanks for your steadfast love,
and sing praises to your name.

God, who shares with us the secrets of the kingdom,
in story and picture and parable:
I give thanks for your steadfast love,
and sing praises to your name.

God, who surprises us with tiny things that make a big difference
and by the hidden process of growth:
I give thanks for your steadfast love,
and sing praises to your name.

God, who renews creation, giving us a new vision of your world,
and the confidence of faith:
I give thanks for your steadfast love,
and sing praises to your name.

Lord God, your ways are often mysterious and hidden,
forgive me when I fail to see you at work.
When I feel discouraged, as if nothing I do makes any difference:
give me patience to wait and hope and to trust in you.
Forgive me when I fail to listen to you,
uncertain of what you are saying to me:
give me patience to wait and hope and to trust in you.

Forgive me when I am discontented and restless,
weighed down and anxious:
give me patience to wait and hope and to trust in you.
Forgive me when I feel that your ways are mysterious,
and signs of growth are hidden:
give me patience to wait and to work for your Kingdom to come and
give me the hope that I can trust in you,
Father God, in whose name I pray

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

'Listen with your eyes,
listen with your eyes,
and sing everything you see!'

Words from the song '*I can sing a rainbow*' written by Arthur Hamilton.

Now, 'listen' for God's word with your eyes and ears as you read two familiar parables that Jesus told. 'Listen' afresh...

Gospel Reading: Mark 4: 26–34

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶ He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² 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.'

The Use of Parables

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Setting the Scene

What do you see in this image?



Perhaps you spot one thing before another

List what you see here...

Find out what I saw on the back page!.

We don't always see the same as the person sitting beside us, sometimes we need help to spot what's right in front of us. Each of us sees a bit of the picture, but between us, when we work together, we might see more fully - we might even see everything!

Perhaps parables work a bit like these optical illusions. We see enough to get our brains working, but leave us wondering whether there's something we've missed. Perhaps someone else can help us to see more clearly, perhaps someone can give us some more ideas and clues and insights and answers. Perhaps that's one of many reasons people followed Jesus, perhaps they were eager to hear more of what he said, to sit with others to chew the fat to try and figure out what Jesus was talking about each bringing their own perspective on the overall 'picture' Jesus was 'painting'

And to those people closest to him, his disciples Jesus would often explain what his parables, his metaphorical picture stories meant.

In the two stories you read there's something about waiting for something to grow without knowing how it grows and, in fact, not really *needing* to know *how* it grows or how it works. There's also something there about the joy of what it grows *into* when it's at its best and most abundant and fruitful.

Perhaps God's kingdom is like that - while we wait with patience and in hope, it's growing whether we realise it or not in quiet, secret and astonishing ways, while we notice bits and pieces along the way but not the whole story. Small beginnings lead to the abundance of fruition - the *end* result - without our full knowledge along the way.

I wonder what other ideas Jesus could have used to help us think about waiting with patience and in hope? Perhaps a baby growing in a mother's womb, or a wound healing, secretly and unnoticed, but growing *nonetheless*.

Hymn – R&S 353: MP 683:

There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty.

There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

There is grace enough for thousands of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations in the Lord's unfathomed bliss.

For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined by the glory of the Lord.

*F. W. Faber (1814-63) altd.**

Reflections

The parable of the mustard seed seems quite straightforward really - it's a bit like that saying, 'From tiny acorns, mighty oaks do grow.' It says that the kingdom of God starts in small ways and then grows into something much, *much* bigger.

But maybe, just maybe Jesus didn't just trot out the sorts of proverbs we've grown up with, besides which, the saying about acorns and oak trees is sometimes the kind of proverb we use to cheer ourselves up when deep down inside we know that the game is really up! It's a bit tongue in cheek, but we can delude ourselves with it.

This Parable appears in Matthew's Gospel and in Luke's Gospel as well as this version in Mark's Gospel, so it must have been considered an important parable to pass on.

Matthew and Mark tell us that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds! But I'm pretty sure I've planted seeds smaller than that, so mustard seeds, small though they are, are not the smallest of all.

And there's something else odd about this parable! I have childhood memories of growing mustard and cress seeds on damp kitchen roll or cotton wool on a tray in the kitchen windowsill, or in egg shells to look like hair - I'd get my felt tipped pens out and draw faces on the shells - but nothing as big as a shrub ever grew from any mustard seed I ever planted!

I know that acorns, given the right environment, can grow into great big oaks, but mustard seeds don't normally grow into shrubs, big enough for birds to nest in - do they?!

So, mustard seeds aren't really that small and mustard plants aren't normally big.

So how should we think about this incongruous parable?

Perhaps a bit more like this

"What **is** the kingdom of God like? Well, it's a bit like this - One day a man (or a woman) went out and sowed a grain of mustard seed in his garden (Luke tells us it was a man's garden) One grain... not very much is it? Hardly worth bothering about really - one seed!

He was hoping at best for a mustard plant, or even (if he was very, very lucky and could find some double espresso style miracle-gro in his shed) a shrub. But what did he get? A massive great big tree! And the sound of the birds twittering in its branches has woken him every morning since that day!

So, perhaps this is a story about something so fantastically unusual that the only way to express it is in things that just sound implausible. Yet Jesus tells us it *is* possible and indeed happening right under our noses all the time.

The kingdom of God is something so very surprising it will make your hair stand on end and your spine tingle!

Mustard seeds don't usually grow into trees - and perhaps that's just the point.

So, what is the kingdom of God like? Well, it's like the story of a man who planted a mustard seed and ended up with a giant oak! That's what the Kingdom of God is like. It's surprising - it's not like the usual kinds of things that happen at all. It's paradox; it's hyperbole; it's utterly and completely over the top - you plant a mustard seed and what do you get - a TREE!

Perhaps the crux of the parable of the mustard seed is the utter shock and surprise, to those who heard Jesus speak, that it grew into a tree! And many other parables that Jesus told tell us that, if we really look and think carefully and pool our ideas, or spend time with God searching for insight, the Kingdom of God has nothing to do with common sense at all. It is something *utterly* extraordinary, miraculous and unexpected and that it's a total change from anything we might possibly have predicted.

In the kingdom of God, it won't simply be that our small gifts will achieve a lot, it will be that the hungry will be fed; the captives will be set free and the lame will leap! It's not that things will get a little bit better, but that the world - our new reality - will be utterly *transformed*.

The story is told that a Church in America was having a mission campaign. They sent out a prayer card to every house and apartment in the neighbourhood. The congregation were busy for weeks, attaching a mustard seed to each card - you can imagine it, I'm sure!

One person in that neighbourhood decided to plant that mustard seed. And it grew, and it grew... into a Tomato plant!

Now that's a parable of the Kingdom of God - the faith to take the step and use the seed we've been given - and to be utterly astonished at the unexpected and unpredictable result.

In the ordinariness of soil and seed, the ordinariness of our lives, the outcome will be something abundant and flourishing. God will astonish us with the unpredictable and the extraordinary!

With thanks to Rev. Susan Durber for her insights which have helped me see new and unexpected dimensions to the picture Jesus painted in the parable of the mustard seed

Hymn – R&S 200: MP 651:

The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
and all things cry 'Glory!' to God all in all.

Bryn A. Rees (1911-83) © Mrs M. Rees*

Holding the World in Prayer

Creative and astonishing God
maker of heaven and earth
sand and sea; seed and shrub

I lift before you in prayer all those who are waiting...
waiting for results of hospital tests, or for news of loved ones;

for exam and assessment results
for decisions about their work - or about redundancy,
or for benefits to be paid.

Lord God, help them to recognise you *with* them in the waiting time.

I lift before you in prayer all those who feel hopeless:
those who are weary of the pressures and demands they face,
those who feel defeated by what life has thrown at them;
those whose hopes and dreams have withered,
as they struggle against impossible odds.

Lord God, give them signs of hope.

I lift before you in prayer all those whose work and care is hidden:
those doing unnoticed jobs
those who keep our communities going;
those whose caring is invisible;
those trying to protect the vulnerable,
or working quietly and persistently for justice.

Lord God, bless their efforts with growth and fruit.

And in a time of quiet I lift to you in prayer all those people you have
given to me to love and care for, my own friends and family

Keep a time of quiet reflection.....

And I pray for myself because sometimes I feel discouraged:
when my beliefs are misunderstood,
when nothing seems to change and I long for signs of hope.
Lord God, renew me - renew us with a vision of your new creation...
abundant and astonishing, extraordinary and unexpected
Amen.

Hymn – R&S 90:

O Lord, all the world belongs to you
and you are always making all things new.
What is wrong you forgive, and the new life you give
is what's turning the world upside down.

The world's only loving to its friends,
but your way of loving never ends,
loving enemies too; and this loving with you
is what's turning the world upside down.

The world lives divided and apart,
you draw us together and we start
in our friendship to see that in harmony we
can be turning the world upside down.

The world wants the wealth to live in state,
but you show a new way to be great:
like a servant you came, and if we do the same,
we'll be turning the world upside down.

O Lord, all the world belongs to you
and you are always making all things new.
What is wrong you forgive, and the new life you give
is what's turning the world upside down.

Patrick Appleford (1925 -) alt. © 1965 Josef Weinberger

Closing Words and Blessing

God of surprises
help me to flourish in your love
and share the hope you give with others

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore. Amen

Here's what I saw in the picture...

- *a man's face*
- *eye brows*
- *eyes*
- *nose*
- *a moustache*
- *a lower lip*
- *trees and tree stumps*
- *2 thatched huts with windows*
- *a shepherd boy*
- *a head of hair*
- *shirt sleeves*
- *a box to lean on*
- *4 lambs*

Any more?....

Some material has been drawn from URC Minister, Rev. Susan Durber's reflection in her 2013 book 'Surprised by Grace - Parables and Prayers' (Granary : A URC Publication)

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