

Sermon, Year C, Proper 6
Christ Church, New Brunswick, NJ
June 14, 2006

Text: Mark 4:26-34

It is a joy to worship with you, always. I am ever so grateful to Deborah for the invitation to speak from this pulpit again, and for her friendship which, among its many benefits, keeps me in touch with your ongoing life together. And I am grateful to you, whether members of long standing or recently arrived, for all that you have brought and continue to bring to this parish, making it such a grace-filled place.

We have just heard two deceptively simple seed parables from *The Gospel of Mark*: The Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself and The Parable of the Mustard Seed. This reading initiates a series of readings that will stretch to the end of November. For the next five and a half months, Sunday by Sunday without interruption, we will be *listening to and living in Mark's Gospel*. Mark's world will become our world; it will engage our imagination. We will picture and re-picture who Jesus is; we will picture and re-picture who we are as his disciples. Jesus' identity and ours intertwined. The story of Jesus as rendered by Mark will intersect our own stories as we live them out, and, to the degree that we are attentive week by week, it will shape us. The Christian community is a storied community, and none of its stories is more foundational than Mark's.

Hearing scripture in this sustained and methodical way is like exploring a cathedral. Light, shadows, color, the texture of the stone, the thrust of the design, the intricate detail, the nooks and crannies, the interplay of spaces large and small all cast a spell the longer we linger. Cathedrals too tell a story, and do so over time. Mark is our cathedral.

We join Mark's narrative today at a point where Jesus' career is already launched. He has issued his first proclamations, called his first disciples, performed his first healings, and challenged his opponents for the first time -- all by way of demonstrating that God's kingdom, God's dominion, is near and that everything he (Jesus) does anticipates it and in some way embodies it. Jesus tells several kingdom parables in chapter 4. The Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself and The Parable of the Mustard Seed bring the sequence to a close.

Both parables are short and, as I say, deceptively simple. Each begins by comparing the dominion of God to a seed planted in the ground; each concludes with the final result: the grain ripe for harvest, the gigantic shrub. In the first parable, the farmer does nothing more than cast the seed into the ground and wait. No watering, no weeding, no fertilizing, a gardener's dream come true. The focus is on the stages of growth -- first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear -- and on the mysterious capacity of the earth to produce by itself. In the second parable there is no farmer, just the tiniest seed and the grandest shrub with branches so large that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. Here the focus is not on stages of growth but on the contrast between the meager beginning and the luxuriant end.

What do these parables mean and why are they important for us? Basically ***they illustrate that in Jesus God has initiated his dominion and that God will consummate it in the end. God, all appearances to the contrary, has begun to reclaim a deeply flawed world for Himself.***

The small seed in both parables represents the mission of Jesus. The grain ready for harvest and the full-grown shrub represent the end when God comes, sickle in hand, to judge the living and the dead, and to provide a place of eternal shelter. The stages of growth in the first parable represent the period in between .

In Mark's Gospel, God's reclamation project commences with Jesus. His mission is phase one. Yet what a meager and inauspicious mission it was. An obscure prophet in a remote corner of the eastern Mediterranean, with a host of skeptics and enemies, a family who thought him crazy, a mere handful of followers, one of whom betrayed him, one of whom denied him, all of whom forsook him and fled. Still, it was here, our parables insist, all appearances to the contrary, that the restoration of God's dominion began -- present and hidden at one at and the same time.

Now, that restoration proceeds blade by blade, ear by ear, grain by grain. How it develops is beyond our comprehension and our control. The seed grows by itself and the farmer knows not how. Mark's community, a generation or more removed from Jesus, would have been encouraged to hear that. It would have been reassured that its efforts to spread the word about him, despite hardship and persecution, would flourish as surely as grain emerging through its stages of growth. And Mark's community would have been reassured as well by the example of the mustard seed whose small beginning contains the germ of a glorious end, a symbol that God's dominion will be finalized in the future beyond all doubt.

These parables are important for us because of the way they frame our life in Christ. They situate us in time. They place us between the beginning and the end. They answer the unexpressed question, "What time is it?" They tell us we live in the meantime, in the interim between the initiation and the consummation of the kingdom of God. And they tell us that "nothing" in the meantime, as George Herbert put it, "is little in God's service." Everything we do, however small or inconspicuous, matters. Everything potentially in the service of God.

Much of the life of this parish consists of seemingly small things we do, often largely out of sight: collecting and distributing food, counseling immigrants, offering intercessory prayers, providing rides to church, visiting the sick, supporting those who mourn, tending the garden, seeing that the buildings are maintained. Even on Sundays when we gather, much of what goes into our life together seems relatively inconspicuous: a greeting at the door, a bulletin handed out, an altar prepared, an urn of coffee brewed, a visitor welcomed. It all matters. It is all an inkling of and a contribution to life in a community where God holds sway. Nothing is little because everything is in God's service.

In a few minutes we will recognize one of Christ Church's hidden ministries, the Sunday School. It is easy to think of the pupils as seeds growing in the faith. But we might also consider the teachers laboring in relative obscurity. Their gift of their

time and themselves to our children and their families is yet another instance of life under the dominion of God.

That life may begin here, but it does not stop here. It extends to God's wider world. I want to cite just one current example of a relatively modest, yet terribly important, contribution to the spread of God's dominion in the public sphere. Two years ago, when the issue was not yet hot, George Hunsinger, a Presbyterian seminary professor, founded The National Religious Campaign Against Torture. It was at the time virtually a one-man enterprise. Since then it has grown into a movement with hundreds of members from all the major religious faiths. It is dedicated not only to the elimination of torture, but also to the full disclosure of the use of torture by our government which dates not from the war in Iraq, but back at least as far as our involvement in Central and South America in the 1980's. Last Thursday a large number of people representing this group presented a petition to the White House calling for full disclosure. Anything short of that will simply embolden our leaders somewhere down the road to resort to torture again.

In the Book of Hebrews (chap 13) we are urged to identify with the victims of torture as though we were, as the text says, "in their bodies." But we can do that only if we know and see what our government has done. Despite the fact that Christians for centuries have considered torture a radical evil, and that polls for decades have shown a clear majority of Americans, both religious and secular, as being opposed to torture in any and all circumstances, the petition presented last Thursday has little chance of success. Yet it and the people who endorsed it are no less agents of God's kingdom for that. What keeps them from becoming resigned and cynical is the promise that in God's good time, and in God's own way, God's kingdom will flourish.

May that promise sustain us as well in all that we do here, in all that we do at home, and in all that we do in the wider world to which God through Christ lays claim.

The Rev. David R. Adams