

2018 06 10 – Your Kingdom Come

Mark 4:26-33

“Jesus said further, ‘The reign of God is like this...’”

In today’s scripture reading, Jesus is talking to a crowd of people. The crowd is so large that Jesus has decided to get into a boat while the crowd remains on the shore. He sits in the boat and begins to preach to this gathering of peasants, of fishermen and farmers. The topic for this particular sermon is the reign or the kingdom, of God.

What is the kingdom of God? Every Sunday we pray The Lord’s Prayer and say “thy kingdom come;” but what is God’s kingdom? When you pray these words, what are you praying for? What is your vision of the kingdom? How would you describe it? (*wait for answers.. peace, justice, hope, freedom, welcome*). Our answers reflect who we are. We all bring our own culture and life experience to our understanding. We bring our own challenges and suffering. We bring our own gifts and successes.

Let’s look at the word “kingdom.” It’s interesting to note how this word is translated in different versions of the Bible and also in different versions of The Lord’s Prayer. Today, Jean read from the *Inclusive Bible* and in that translation they use the term “reign of God.” The version of The Lord’s Prayer that we said this morning, used a couple of different phrases; we prayed that “the way of your

justice be followed,” and that “your commonwealth of peace and freedom” would “sustain our hope and come on earth.” “Kingdom, “reign,” way of justice,” and commonwealth of peace and freedom,” these are all ways of saying the same thing.

Many people, including me, prefer not to use hierarchical language like king and kingdom since it emphasizes a power over image of God and suggests a world where only a few have power over the many. I prefer words like “commonwealth” or “kindom” that suggest a world where power and wealth is distributed more evenly.

But many scholars argue that Jesus used the word “kingdom” for a reason. Jesus and his followers lived in a time when the Roman Empire was in power in their land. In first century Galilee and Judea, the Hebrew people were struggling because of heavy taxes and many had lost their ancestral land. They were dreaming of better times, times like the reign of King David when the kingdom of Israel was huge and their armies were able to subdue all their foes. Many people in Jesus’ time were hoping for another military kingdom, like that one.

One of their favourite images of the kingdom of Israel came from their holy scriptures, from the book of Ezekiel. According to the prophet, God said, “

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; ... On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. (Ezekiel 17:22-23)

The Israelites loved to dream of a kingdom that stood tall and proud like the noble cedar.

But when Jesus asked the crowd, “What comparison can we use for the reign of God? What image will help to present it?” Jesus didn’t suggest the noble cedar, did he? What image did Jesus use? (*wait for response.. mustard seed, mustard plant*) Yes, Jesus chose the mustard plant. Did you know that 90% of the world’s mustard is grown in Canada? And the majority is grown right here in Saskatchewan. How many of you have grown mustard plants in your fields? (*wait for show of hands*) So you would know the answer to this question. How high do mustard plants grow? (*wait for response*) (*next screen*) Here’s a picture of a farmer in Saskatchewan in a field of mustard – you can see that the plants are past his knees, but not up his hips. Now there are different types of mustard. What types are grown in Saskatchewan? (*wait for response, yellow, brown, oriental*) (*next screen*) Here’s another picture that was taken in the Middle East – you can see that this mustard plant is quite a bit taller, taller even than the man can reach. But it was still an exaggeration for Jesus to say, “it springs up to become the largest of shrubs, with branches big enough for the birds of the sky to build nests in its shade.”

William Herzog, a noted biblical scholar, tells us that Jesus did this deliberately. He wanted the people in the crowd to do the comparison between the noble cedar and the significantly less noble, mustard plant. According to Herzog, the mustard plant was the perfect image because, and I quote:

“Once sown, it spreads like a weed, causing havoc on the ordered garden of the land... The mustard shrub becomes an agent of confusion and source of uncleanness. The goal of sowing is not to turn it into something it isn’t (a tree) but to maximize what it is (a ubiquitous shrub), a force to be reckoned with. Like the land itself, the purpose of the shrub is to provide for others, the birds of the air.” (Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God, p 206)

Jesus used the word kingdom and described it in this way because he wanted his listeners to realize that the kingdom of God was not like the noble cedar, it was not like David’s kingdom, it would not have the military might of their Roman oppressors. The kingdom that Jesus was describing was going start small, like a mustard seed and it was going spread like a weed. It was not going to be pretty and ordered like a backyard garden or a seeded field, or a row of soldiers. It was never going to have the hierarchical structure and great height of the noble cedar. The kingdom that Jesus was describing was one of peace and justice. It was a place where everyone would have what they needed, including the smallest and the weakest. It was a place where the current world order would be turned upside down.

Every Sunday we pray that this vision of the reign of God, this commonwealth of peace and justice and freedom may come. But how is it going to get here? How is this kingdom going to arrive? Obviously we believe that God has a lot to do with it. But there must be a role for us too. Where are we in this picture? Who are we in this parable? Are we the sower, the seed, the soil, the bush or are we the bird? Who are we? Can you see yourself there at all?

I want to share a story that I heard this week on CNN. It is a story about a sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Toensing, and the words that she wrote on a student’s report

card 21 years ago. The student was Christin Gilmer and the words were, "It has been a joy to have you in class. Keep up the good work! Invite me to your Harvard graduation." In May of this year, Christin graduated from Harvard as a doctor of public health. She is now 33 years old and she kept that note all these years. Christin said of her teacher, "She lit a fire in me that helping people is a powerful tool, and through education, you can better serve populations in need. I will never forget her passion for others," In this story Mrs. Toensing nourished the seed and was lucky enough to see her mustard plant after it had grown and borne fruit. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/25/us/teacher-harvard-graduation-21-year-old-note-trnd/index.html>

I would argue that at different times we embody each and every one of the roles in Jesus' parable. Sometimes we are the sower, and we spread the seeds of hope, love, peace and joy in this world. Sometimes we are the seed itself and we need the support of others before we can fulfil our role in the reign of God. Sometimes we are the soil, a place for others to find the nourishment they need to grow in faith and hope. Sometimes we are the bush, a place of shelter from the harsh realities of life. And sometimes we are the bird, needing a place of warmth and safety. When we fulfill these roles then we are working with God. We are working with God to spread mustard plants all over the world. We are working with God to create a new commonwealth of peace and freedom. May God's kingdom come.