



## The Kin-dom of God

When I got home yesterday evening, I switched on the TV and, seeking sanctuary from the World Cup, caught the last 15 minutes of a feature length documentary called *Earth: One Amazing Day*. Narrated by Robert Redford, and filmed by the same team behind David Attenborough's Planet Earth and Blue Planet, it charted the story of life on Earth over the course of a single day, through some spectacular cinematography. The snippet I saw featured stunning footage of a penguin undertaking a perilous daily commute to feed his family, a mother zebra who ferociously warned off the leopard that tried to attack her foal, and a field mouse that survived a fearsome fall from the top of a tall stalk to the unforgiving undergrowth below to avoid the clutches of a hungry owl. Towards the very end, the screen filled not with wildlife but with breath-taking scenes of the Northern Lights filmed from above the Earth; those mystical, shimmering, shifting vibrant colours that fill the sky with beauty and wonder.

I was reminded, yet again, that Creation is utterly amazing and equally mysterious. This is apparent in this first short parable we've heard Jesus tell – about the person who sows the seed and then goes about his regular business, night and day as the seed quietly does the same, going about its regular business, sprouting and coming to life in the soil. Indeed, the phrase Jesus uses, the earth producing 'of itself' translates as 'automatic', something that is pre-programmed, that happens without the need for any intervention. Yet within that seemingly simple process is cause for immense wonder. As my mum put it when we were talking about this passage recently, "How does each seed know what to grow into – what size and shape and colour? How does it know

whether it's a rose or a runner bean?" It is indeed astonishing that so many different, diverse, distinct and complex life forms lie hidden within such tiny seeds.

Jesus is very clear that these two short parables, of the growing seed and of the mustard seed, which we shall come on to, are about the Kingdom of God. So from this first parable, we see that the Kingdom of God is seen in the little, seemingly ordinary everyday things. This would certainly have been a novel and surprising concept for his audience, who thought of kingdoms in terms of powerful monarchs or occupying forces, with all the attendant trappings. Kingdoms were visible in armies and palaces and power and possessions, not tiny seeds sprouting invisibly in the earth. But of course, God's Kingdom is very different to earthly kingdoms. What Jesus is describing in his parables, and modelling in his life, is more of a kin-dom than a kingdom. He shows us how to live as God's people – people of faith, compassion and imagination.

In our age of busyness and micro-management, one of the striking things in this parable is the simplicity of the sower. He sows the seed and then gets on with his daily business. He doesn't fret and fertilise and weed and water; he simply sows the seed and has faith that nature, the automatic earth, will take its course. What's also important to note is that as soon as the grain is ripe, he harvests it straightaway. There is attentiveness and responsibility. He works with Creation and with God; he plays his part in growing the kingdom, just indeed as Jesus does. My favourite description of this parable comes from Bishop Michael Ball who calls it "the story of a laughing young man who

adores those he is speaking to and knows he has the power to captivate them.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a beautiful image, but as I’ve gone through the week, as I’ve wondered about the experiences of our pilgrims who’ve recently returned from Auschwitz, and watched the events to mark the first anniversary of the Grenfell Tower disaster, and read many wonderful tributes to Mercedes, I’ve found myself reflecting upon the times when life isn’t as simple and straightforward and organic as we would wish. What about the weeds and pesticides? What about the times when nature seems terrifyingly out of control? What about when our bodies go wrong? What about those who would use violence and unspeakable cruelty to change the natural course of events to meet their own ends? What about those who care not for kin-dom but seek only to harvest power or profit, no matter how much suffering they sow in the process?

Archie Hill was a writer and broadcaster who grew up as one of 11 children in an impoverished working class family with an abusive alcoholic father. Hill himself battled alcoholism for many years. When his life became more stable he married and in one of his books, *Closed World of Love*, he wrote about his 26 year old step-son Barry, who was severely physically and mentally disabled, and of how he was able to learn from him by imaginatively putting himself in his place. In the book, Hill recalled one memorable evening. “One night I wrapped [Barry] in a blanket and took him onto the back porch and let him look at the sky. I had not thought to do this before. Suddenly I wanted to give him new experiences . . . to fill his mind with happy wonder. Things I had taken for granted, like moon and stars and night, suddenly seemed filled with magic. Sitting with him on the porch, I felt some strange awe. An explanation of how I’d become me. How millions of microscopic sperm-seeds were sent on a long hard

journey. How for a full-grown man to compete with this sperm-journey he would have to cross the Sahara on foot, swim ten miles upstream against a raging current, climb the Alps and walk halfway across Siberia. If one of the seeds had reached the egg instead of my seed, I would not have come into existence. And I looked at Barry and marvelled that the seed which became him had won through . . . The miracle of everything came about with the seed’s journey, which brought life into being. Sitting with Barry I looked at the stars and knew that we are both part of the same system.”<sup>2</sup>

That same system we are all part of - this mysterious and wonderful Creation - is not immune from suffering, and we see that no more clearly than in the life of Christ. We see this in the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus also introduces this as a parable of the Kingdom, but for me, it is also the story of Jesus himself as a living parable. Some have found it curious that Jesus uses the example of the mustard seed as it grows not into a mighty tree but the largest of shrubs – again, not in line with ancient ideas of kingdom. Matthew and Luke changed their versions to a tree, but here in Mark there is still a hint of comic irony and shades of that ‘laughing young man’. The mighty shrub that grew from the tiniest of seeds is a place of kin-dom offering shelter and protection for all.

It is from the tiniest of seeds that God’s kin-dom grows, quietly, sometimes out of sight, but at every stage it is a place characterised by faith, compassion and imagination. And Christ, the living parable is ultimately the seed that must fall into the earth and die, for that same kin-dom to be fully realised.

For those of us blindsided by unexpected and unwanted twists and turns in our journey through life, these parables urge us to be patient, to learn the hard lesson of simply holding on when the way ahead seems uncertain and underneath is not even soil but

---

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Michael Ball, *The Foolish Risks of God*, 2002, p. 25

---

<sup>2</sup> Archie Hill, *Closed World of Love*, 1976

shifting sand. They urge us to trust that God's kin-dom is still unfolding out of sight, somewhere in the dark. They urge us, difficult as it maybe, to simply wait and trust; to prioritise faith over anxiety, and sometimes, to exercise our imagination, recognising that we are each a new creation in progress.

Jesus is the mustard seed – the extraordinary in the ordinary. He started out in seemingly simple beginnings, a baby born to an ordinary couple in a stable in the middle of the night in a busy town and grew into a man and a movement that revealed God's kin-dom here on earth, and changed the world, the course of history and the way we measure time. Similarly the disciples began life as ordinary, everyday folk, hidden in plain sight and went on to form the Christian church.

These parables are filled with hope and encouragement. They remind us that we have our part to play, that we are needed in the harvest but that the power is God's not ours. They remind us that God's love and creativity is at work in our world even in our darkest nights, even when we feel hopeless and cannot see any sign of it. They encourage us to exercise our own compassion and imagination in helping to build God's kin-dom, to dare to let projects blossom from the germ of an idea that stems from a casual conversation or the seed that's sown through a chance encounter. They encourage us to look at one another and the world around us afresh, to remember, in the words of St Paul that "in Christ, everything has become new!"

We live in an age where many of the wonders of creation are now available to us in fresh and exciting ways. Through the wonders of technology we can see and experience things our ancestors could only dream of. From the ordinary surroundings of our living rooms and desks we can travel the world, look into the nest of an endangered species, the eye of the storm, the depths of the ocean or the further reaches of space. And yet the more we learn, the more we discover, the more we

realise how little we know; just how much is still sacred and mysterious, the more we realise that God is still at work in our world, even when we can't see it. There is a scientific word for how each seed knows whether it is a rose or a runner bean: DNA. But there's also a word for how such miracles happen – either hidden or in plain sight. And that's Grace.

I close with some well-known lines which will no doubt have particular resonance with those who have recently returned from the Human Rights Pilgrimage. They are taken from a poem written during the second World War on the wall of a cellar in a German concentration camp:

I believe in the sun  
Even when it is not shining.  
And I believe in love  
Even when there's no one there.  
And I believe in God,  
Even when he is silent.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.  
Lindsay Meader

---

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, discovered written on the wall of a WW2 concentration camp in Cologne