

Sermon for Pentecost 4, Year B

17 June 2018

Out of Control

Mark 4:26-34

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

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

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

The Parable of the Growing Seed, is one of my favourite Jesus stories. '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.' Note the strength of the comparison: the kingdom is presented as the very thing sown. The kingdom is not the result of the sowing of something quite different that then develops into the kingdom. Rather the kingdom as such is present, in all of its power, right from the start. And from the force of the imagery of sowing, the seed is clearly to be understood as having been sown in this world, squarely in the midst of every human and even every earthly condition. Notice that the kingdom is a *worldly* piece of business, not something that happens elsewhere. Often when we think of heaven, it is an unearthly, humanly irrelevant condition in which bed-sheeted, paper-winged spirits sit on clouds and play tinkly music until their pipe-cleaner halos fall off from boredom. As we often envision it, it is a sterile scene, akin to an Apple Store or the bridge of the latest starship Enterprise. It contains not one baby's bottom, not one pair of dirty feet, much less a risen basketball game between glorified 'shirts' and 'skins.' But that is not a scriptural image of the afterlife. In Scripture, the New Jerusalem is a city with boys and girls playing in the streets; it is buildings put up by a Department of Public Works that uses amethysts for cinder blocks and pearls as big as elephants for gates; and indoors is a dinner party to end all dinner parties at the marriage supper of the Lamb. It is, in short, an image of earth wedded, loved and honoured, not earth jilted. It is the world as the irremovable apple of God's eye.

That is what Jesus is proclaiming in this parable. In the rest of the parable he drives home, with a clarity matched almost nowhere else, the absolute sovereignty of that kingdom over the earth that it wills to make its home. There are no references at all here to the dangers that hostility might pose for it; nor are there even any references to the detrimental or beneficial effects of the various responses that

human beings might make to it. In this telling, Jesus ignores these matters entirely. As Jesus depicts it, once the person in the parable has sown the seed, he or she does nothing other than mind their own and not the seed's business. They go to bed at night and get up in the morning — then they shop at the supermarket, unclog the sink, whip up a gourmet supper, play chamber music with friends, watch the eleven o'clock news, and go to bed again. And they do that and nothing but that day after day — while all along, the seed that is the kingdom sprouts and grows in a way that they themselves *simply know nothing about*.

At that point, Jesus makes a startling statement: the earth bears fruit *of itself*, (the Greek is the word for automatic, so it bears fruit automatically. Jesus says all one must do is to put the kingdom into the world; *any* kind of a world — not only into a world of hotshot responders or spiritual pros, but into a world of sinners, deadbeats, and other assorted poor excuses for humanity (which interestingly enough, is the only world available anyway) — and it will come up a perfect kingdom all by itself: “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” It takes its time about it, to be sure; but the time it takes is entirely its own, not anyone else's. Please note that in this parable there is nothing about crop failure, any more than there is about the depredations of the devil or the knuckle headedness of humanity. This is just the proclamation of a sowing that mysteriously but effectively results in growth toward the harvest.

At this point I can hear you sigh, “Ahhh, the harvest. At last Jesus will bring all to rights: Enough of this indiscriminate inclusiveness, too much silence about all the criminal types who will take this inclusivity as permission to go right on committing their felonies, even in the New Jerusalem. At last Jesus is about to threaten the world with the eschatological comeuppance that we know and love so well.”

In this parable, however, get used to disappointment. In other parables, Jesus does use the idea of the harvest to introduce the idea of millennial police work, but not here. Here he simply contents himself with a last line not one bit more discriminating than the rest of the parable: “But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” Not one word about separating the wheat from the weeds. Not a syllable about getting the baddies out of the kingdom and burning them up in fire unquenchable.

Granted, he does include such utterances elsewhere, but whenever Jesus felt himself in the presence of minds that were itching to jump to their favourite conclusions about how God should run the universe, he deliberately refused to give them a platform to jump from. Perhaps that is what he is doing here.

Most all of us are eschatology junkies. We are so consumed with the idea that wrongs must be set right and that evildoers must be run out of the New Jerusalem on a rail that we convince ourselves that the Holy City can actually be brought into being by means of cops-and-robbers games. Our favourite solutions to the world's

deep and humanly intractable problems with sin are punching people in the nose, locking them up in the slammer, and — failing all else — buying them a oneway trip out of town on the electric chair. Worse yet, when we come to the point (as we always do) of giving God advice about how to deal eternally with the same problems, we simply concoct eternal variations of the same procedures.

But, but, but, but: *that is not what we are talking about here*. And for even more of a *but*: that is the very subject that Jesus is scrupulously avoiding at the end of the parable of the growing seed. His subject is the utterly fundamental one of *how* the kingdom grows, of *the means by which* the city is built. It is not the relatively minor one of how the Divine Police Department keeps muggers off the streets of the New Jerusalem.

The kingdom grows, he says, because the kingdom is already planted. It grows of itself, automatically, and in its own good time. Above all, it grows *we know not how*. Any bright ideas we might have on the subject will always and everywhere be the wrong ideas: Indeed their wrongness will be proved simply by our having them; because if the kingdom could have been made to grow in this world by bright ideas, it would have sprouted up all over the place ten times a day ever since Adam. But it never did and it never will, except in a mystery that remains resolutely beyond our moralising, score-evening comprehension.

Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is at hand, planted here, at work in *this* world. The Word sown is none other than God incarnate. By his death and resurrection in A.D. 29, he reconciles everything, everywhere, to himself — whether they be things on earth or things in heaven. And at the end, when he makes all things new, he makes not just a new heaven but a new earth — a glorified recreation of his old stamping ground. The Bible's last chapters proclaim a heaven and earth inextricably intertwined. Whatever else the "New Jerusalem" may signify, it says plainly that, "heaven" will be as earthy as the final earth will be heavenly — and that's the way it's going to be forever.