

# The Tree of Life ...

## *... a place of Shelter and Growth*

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*A sermon given on Second Sunday After Trinity, 3<sup>th</sup> June 2021, by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in the Online Attended Communion Service*

*Mark 4:26-34*

Those of you who were here last time I was speaking, I spoke on the Trinity and I talked about the fact that we use lots of different images and people down history of use different images to try and explain difficult concepts. And today, we're looking at some parables, which are images in stories, that Jesus used to explain difficult concepts. He told them to question, to challenge, to teach, to tease and to invite questions about who he is and what the kingdom of God is like and how his message and ministry would shape the future of the world.

Now, if you are of my generation, you'll probably know what this is and I know it's there. Did anybody have any of these on their walls when they were younger? Yeah. Any of you drive yourself crazy trying to get your eyes to see. We have some definite notes here, if you don't know and if you're listening on the telephone, I've got a magic eye up, which is a colourful image that looks like a pattern. But if you can just focus your eyes correctly, out will leap a dolphin or a flower or a palm tree or some incredible hidden image that just seems to appear from nowhere. And that's a little bit what parables are like, because the more we look at them, the more we listen to them, the more we train our ears and eyes to to hear what Jesus is saying, suddenly things leap out at us and we, like the disciples, go, "Oh, that's what it means." And I'm not promising to be able to do that completely this morning, but I hope we can have a look together.

The first parable draws on the image of seeds growing quietly and then being harvested. And there are tons of hidden layers in there containing ideas about the liberation of Israel and the judgement of her enemies. But it's also hinting at the fact that Jesus might not be the revolutionary that they were expecting; that he is the 'quiet and gentle, growing while nobody is looking' kind of change. But I'm not going to focus on that parable this morning because we haven't got time to do justice to both. I want to focus on the second parable, which is another 'growing' metaphor.

And this time it draws comparisons with a mustard seed, something that is really, really small and insignificant. In fact, Jesus's hearers would have chuckled at the time because mustard seed just meant something incredibly tiny. It's a teeny tiny seed that eventually grows into a huge tree or if we're being accurate, a bush; it doesn't actually form a mustard tree, but a mustard bush, with plenty of room in its branches for birds to shelter and for life to flourish.

This is the fresh vision of what God is like and what his kingdom is going to be like. It makes reference to the beautiful passage in Isaiah 40, which asks, 'With whom then will you compare God? What image will you liken him?' For Jesus, the mustard seed is one man with just a few straggly followers in backwater Galilee. And from this mustard seed beginning, God's kingdom will grow and spread, creating his kingdom, a place where all can find safety and shelter, food and a home.

Now, I love the image that you can see - it's an artist's impression of this parable. It's a beautiful tree, full of birds and shelter, and round the edges are the words of the parable. But I love it because I think, like the parable, it invites us firstly to find our own place in the tree; our own shelter amongst the branches of God's love and purposes. And for some of us who are here this morning, this might be the only thing that we really need to hear. It's been a long, bruising and frightening year. We've lost loved ones; been separated from family and friends; worked relentlessly; or been without anything to do; we've been lonely and frustrated; trapped in a house, home schooling; or trapped in a care home alone. When we were talking about the wedding couples, none of us are sure what the new normal will actually look like and life still feels very fragile. I've been connecting with a number of friends around the country, all speaking of mental health, all very, very bruised and broken at this time.

So you might be feeling like one of the birds that has migrated from a far off place, you might be lost and exhausted and thirsty. And if so, I invite you to simply rest in the branches of God's tree, and to hear these words that come from the end of Isaiah 40, 'Do you not know? Have you not heard the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the Earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom; he gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint. And I

invite you to perhaps return to Isaiah 40 during this week and to allow those words to speak to your soul. Perhaps to put on some worship music and simply rest in the healing and restoring love of God.

But once you are rested, then hear Jesus's second call, which is to be kingdom builders. Once the birds have rested, they don't stay sat in the tree. They fly around, build nests, lay eggs, find food, and they spread the seed wider and further, playing their part in creating more shelter and places of safety. Jesus's kingdom spreads gradually, almost invisibly, but prolifically. People who have been captured by the message, the love and the restorative love of Jesus, pass the good news on in so many ways, often unseen and invisible to much of the world, just like the newly planted seeds.

Again, it says in Isaiah 40, 'You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up; do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God.'" Now, there aren't many mountains around here, and we don't have to literally shout about our faith, but as the parable of the farmer and his seed shows us, as we scatter seeds wherever we go, some of them will grow. You have no idea who you might smile at, speak to or meet up with and chat with this week, whose faith will grow because of your encouragement. Your kind words of welcome to somebody here at the minister or out and about in life, could change their whole perception of God and faith. Time and again, I've met people who have had an unfortunate experience in the church and then they've met another Christian and said, "Oh, I didn't realise that's what it was meant to be like."

You may never know how your prayers have been answered, but the seed quietly spreads and grows. The money and the time that so many of you donate, both here and to others and to charities, could change forever the life of somebody you will never meet, creating more safe spaces for others to shelter in. Your one signature on a petition may seem insignificant, but together our voices can make the world a fairer place. Every moment you invest in sowing seeds of love, seeds of Jesus's kingdom, is continuing to make this parable a reality to help people see that they have worth value and purpose; to help people understand a faith may seem unclear, like the magic eye, come to life through the person of Jesus, through our love. We're going to hear a piece of music during the communion called The Tree of Life, the

words of which describe a time when all will be restored, when the tree that Jesus hints of there becomes the tree for everywhere and everyone. And until that time, we have the greatest privilege of continuing what Jesus began. Let's be seed-sowers this week.

Amen

## Reading Texts

### Mark 4:26-34

<sup>26</sup> He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.' <sup>30</sup> He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? y It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> 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.' <sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup> he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.