

Dorset South and West Circuit

Service for Sunday 26 July 2020 by Tim Wells, Local Preacher .

As you begin to focus on and in God's presence, you might like to breathe in and out slowly, or simply keep silent - or to prepare in whichever way seems best for you.

I suggest that you then read the following service slowly - there is no need to rush!

And so, firstly ...

A prayer of approach

Lift up our souls, O Lord, to the pure, serene light of your presence; that there we may breathe freely, there repose in thy love, there may be at rest from ourselves, and from thence return, arrayed in thy peace, to do and bear what shall please thee; for thy holy name's sake.

(Edward Bouverie Pusey 1800-82)

Hymn (STF18)

Be still and know that I am God,
Be still and know that I am God,
Be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord who saves and heals,
I am the Lord who saves and heals,
I am the Lord who saves and heals.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust,
In you, O Lord, I put my trust,
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

Gospel reading.

Matthew 13:31-33

13:31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;

13:32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Reflection

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel gives us Jesus's story of the mustard seed. Something small growing into something tremendous.

I think the smallest seeds I have ever planted are Petunia seeds ... just like dust. The mustard seed which Jesus speaks of is not actually as small as all that. Even in Palestine in Jesus's time, mustard seeds were not the smallest known, but they were generally used as a symbol of something really tiny.

Jesus himself said that if you have faith like a mustard seed: that is if you have even the

tinest bit of faith, you can move mountains.

So Jesus here is contrasting the beginning with the end ... the tiny seed with the full-grown Mustard Tree, which, in Palestine, can grow to be 10 or 12 feet tall, and strong enough for birds to roost in it.

We have a similar saying, of course: "Great oaks from little acorns grow"

And acorns are also not that small – but it is the contrast between what you start with and what you end with which is important.

And that's what Jesus was getting at.

In his first letter to the young Christians at Corinth, Paul also makes some contrasts. For example:

"The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."

And the main point of the story of the mustard seed is that God's kingdom grows from just such an insignificant, unimpressive beginning.

It starts from the smallest of things, but no-one knows where it will end.

When they started out, Jesus's disciples were certainly not a particularly inspiring, religious, or united lot. These were ordinary people leading ordinary lives. There was simply nothing special about them at all.

And yet Jesus entrusted them with the Good News of God and His Kingdom.

Inexperienced though they were, it became their responsibility to spread the message of Jesus both by their words and by their actions. So many great things have begun from something small. Many of the charities we are familiar with today originated with just one or two people - Barnado's, the National Children's Home, now Action for Children, and in our own day, Help for Heroes.

And, no doubt, many others.

And so Jesus uses the picture of the mustard seed and its development to remind His disciples that God's kingdom can grow when times are difficult, and even when things seem impossible.

Many people, especially in the media, perhaps, want to tell us that the church is finished, and is in terminal decline.

I remember one woman saying on television during some street interviews that she would not be satisfied until every church building was not only closed but demolished as well.

She wasn't challenged on why she felt so bitter and opposed to the church, but that was her attitude.

But let's not be fooled into believing that the media are right, and that the church is dying.

The media after all simply have to sell their stories.

We may feel that at times in our country the church is getting weaker, but even here in Britain, and even in Methodism, there are good things happening, many of them in local churches and situations which we don't often hear about.

And, across the world, more than a quarter of the world's population identify themselves as Christian, despite the severe persecutions taking place in North Africa, the Middle East, and across Asia.

According to the Pew Research Centre, Christians face persecution in 102 countries across the globe.

And yet, in spite of this, we may have heard of the dramatic increase in the church in parts of Africa and Asia, and the church in China, for example, may today have more than 100 million members.

So let's not be automatically persuaded by those who want to see only "doom and gloom" for the church.

There are lots of "mustard seeds" growing within the church, if we look for them. We can really be encouraged, if we seek to find out about them.

Perhaps we ought to look out for them more than we do.

Jesus wanted His disciples to be positive about Him, and about God's Kingdom. Their message was to be one of God's love, and care for people. And so were their actions.

We are letting God down if we don't do what we can to spread the same message ... it is challenging, but that is God's challenge for us!

We may not think we understand very much of it - the disciples certainly didn't - but that is also part of God's challenge.

And, like the growth of the mustard seed, we really don't know where these challenges will end!

Prayers of Intercession

Father, we bring to you in prayer the hopes and the needs of the world. Each person you have made bears your image: but in each that image is assaulted by many enemies. Hunger and homelessness, violence and the fear of violence, greed, jealousy, boredom - all these threaten the humanity of men and women which is your breath within them.

May your Church everywhere be a force for peace with justice. May the gospel of Jesus awaken everywhere such a vision of our real destiny that evil may be overcome, not with other evil, but with good.

And upon all who strive for the fulfilment of your reign on earth, may there come such a spirit of trust and hope that nothing may seem too hard to do in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Caryl Micklem

The Lord's Prayer

Our final hymn by Charles Wesley calls on us to rely on God and follow Him as His servants.

Hymn (STF658)

A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill:
Oh, may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care,
As in your sight to live;
And O your servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,
And on yourself rely,
So shall I not my trust betray,
Nor love within me die.

Final prayer

Let us go to serve;
go to love;
go to bring healing;
go to bring peace;
go in the strength of the Father;
go in the power of Jesus;
go united by the Spirit.

Amen.