

June 13, 2021 - 3rd Sunday after Pentecost - Sermon
1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

A major theme that has captured my attention, and my imagination, over the past few years is the concept of ‘the kingdom of God has come near’. I hope you are not too bored hearing me comment about this because I still find the concept very compelling. This feeling is partly due to the message that the kingdom of God has come near was, and is, a central part of Jesus’ message to the world. One of the difficulties met when dealing with this concept is trying to understand what happens in this world when the kingdom of God comes near. What effects, if any, will this nearness cause? We pray that God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven so what exactly are we asking? There is, of course, no way to know completely what is meant by this phrase but by watching Jesus’ life and listening to his teaching we get some very important clues. We know, for instance, that when the kingdom of God comes near demons are made powerless to continue to harm people. When the kingdom of God comes near illnesses are cured and infirmities removed. When the kingdom of God comes near a second (and third and fourth...) chance is given and repentance is the way in to that gift. Jesus used his words and actions to let his disciples know more about what he meant when he declared “The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the Good News”.

The passage from Mark’s Gospel that is assigned for today’s service contains two images that are meant to help people grapple with what Jesus means when he tells his followers that ‘the kingdom of God has come near’. Mark began this chapter of his account with the parable of the Sower and the image of a Lamp on a Stand and then he turns to the two images we hear in the context of this worship service. “This is what the kingdom of God is like”, Jesus said. (Mk 4:26) In these parables Jesus was trying to help his followers understand a little more about the effects the kingdom of God was going to have on the life of the earth. Often the imagery Jesus used was somewhat confusing, but I have found that by meditating on the images with the help of the Holy Spirit much of that confusion disappears. So here are some comments that I would like to make about these two portions of scripture - Mark 4:26-29 & 30-34.

Mark 4:26–29 As the kingdom of God comes near to our lives on earth it is like a man scattering seed on the ground. At first there is not much impact or excitement because the seed needs to germinate first. There may be no visible impact for some time, but a miracle is taking

place as the seed begins to transform. Anyone who grows plants from seed knows this fact. Good seed, when placed in the proper conditions, grows but there is often an uncertainty until the first shoots appear. The kingdom of God is like this when it arrives in our hearts and as it impacts the world around us. It is interesting to me that the man who scatters the seed in this parable counts on the soil to produce the harvest. I take this to mean that it is God's kingdom that is in the seed and the proper growing conditions are all that it needs to grow. From the parable of the Sower, we learn that sometimes the seed falls on the wrong kind of soil or into the midst of thorns, so the harvest doesn't happen. When the correct conditions are found the result is incredible. This suggests that the only work we might be required to do in order to experience the kingdom of God growing in our lives is to ensure that the soil of our lives makes for a good growing medium. Our regular practice of confession is part of that process as is our practice of forgiveness toward others. "The root of bitterness" does not make for good soil and neither does a hard packed soil of stubbornness. As much as it lies within us, if we wish to see the kingdom of God growing in our own lives, we need to tend to these kinds of problems so that the soil of our lives is as good as it can be. We also are asked to do what we can to promote this practice within our community so that the soil in which our community lives is a good producing soil. This may require us to call people to repentance the way in which Jesus did. "The kingdom of God has come near", Jesus said, "repent and believe the Good News."

Mark 4:30-35 As the kingdom of God comes near to our lives on earth it is like the planting of a mustard seed. Jesus explains that a mustard seed is an exceedingly small seed indeed. It can easily be missed because of its size. But the wonder that is contained inside the seed produces an amazing plant. Unlike wheat or corn the mustard plant to which Jesus was referring grew into a bush which not only enabled the farmer to harvest mustard seed, but the bush provided a haven for birds as well. In addition to what was seen in the previous parable this additional aspect of the kingdom is important to consider. The main purpose of the mustard seed is to produce mustard but there are some side benefits that exist as well. The main purpose of our lives, if our lives are influenced by God's kingdom, will occur as will some side benefits to the community in which we live. These benefits will often be enjoyed by others who are not necessarily a part of our fellowship or a part of our family circle. This fact is learned through thinking about the parable Jesus proclaimed. We learn that it is the nature of the kingdom of God

to produce things to be enjoyed by othersain , some of whom are not a part of the fellowship, and all these things begin with the smallest of all seeds.

Jesus frequently declared that something new was on the horizon and described that new thing as the nearness of the kingdom of God. St. Paul proclaimed in his letters that our hearts, the centre of our being, is inhabited by God's Holy Spirit which means that in our hearts the kingdom of God has come near. So, as we continue to live as followers of Jesus may we take comfort in the knowledge that the seed of God has been planted in our hearts. Regardless of the fact that we have been separated from many of our customary activities because of the pandemic our hearts are still homes for the seed of God. The growth of that seed is under God's control but the environment in which the seed is planted is largely under our influence. Let us take what measures we can to ensure that the seed from God is growing as it should. Let us take the time, for instance, to be sure that the soil in which that seed is growing is as free as it can be of weeds and other impediments to growth by practicing forgiveness and confession. And let us rejoice when the plant which is growing provides shelter for other aspects of God's creation in the people who come into our circle looking for care and compassion. May we, as followers of Jesus, ask the Holy Spirit to continue to help us understand the parables and other portions of tlinescripture that come before us so that we may "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18)

A Prayer Of Thanksgiving

O Most merciful Father, we humbly thank you for all the gifts so freely bestowed upon us. For life and health and safety, for power to work and leisure to rest, for all that is beautiful in creation and in our lives, we praise and magnify your holy Name. But, above all, we thank you for our spiritual mercies in Christ Jesus our Lord, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. Fill our hearts with all joy and peace in believing; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 736 adapted)