Spade work Mark 4:26-29

This parable of the Kingdom follows hot on the heels of the parable of the sower. If the parable of the sower speaks of how hard it is for the Gospel to take root in people’s lives, then this parable speaks of the secret growth of the Kingdom that goes on unnoticed. It points also to the fact that often the work of the Kingdom of God is slow.

Jesus’ followers must have been frustrated with him from time to time because they tried to complete the revolution that Jesus brought in, in their own way. After the feeding of the five thousand they attempted to make him King. They also hoped that the triumphal entry into Jerusalem would bring about the completion of this revolution. Did they see Jesus as impotent sometimes? I am sure that they wanted him to act more quickly and decisively. I wonder if we sometimes feel that as we seek to live for Jesus everyday of our lives wherever we find ourselves? Do you ever feel that the mission of God’s church is frustratingly slow?

Jesus’ parable compares the Kingdom of God to a farmer, who after he has sown his seed, does nothing until harvest, when he again goes to work bringing in his crop. There are three scenes in this parable:

Scene 1: The farmer sowing his seed

Scene 2: The farmer doing nothing except going to bed and getting up each day. It is not that he is lazy, indeed any farmer today would baulk at any such suggestion. The point being made here is that in this period, between sowing and harvesting, he is relatively inactive; he simply waits. The activity is in the seed and not the farmer. It grows naturally in a way that the farmer has nothing to do with it. It grows steadily in a way that the farmer does not understand or control.

Scene 3: The farmer swings back into action, putting in his sickle and gathering the ripened corn

The use of the sickle to gather in the harvest in scene 3 is strongly reminiscent of the description of God’s final judgement in Joel 3:12-13, where we read ‘Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come trample the grapes, for the wine press is full and the vats overflow – so great is their wickedness’. Jesus is using this description deliberately. He is explaining in this parable that he has indeed brought in the Kingdom of God, but he is like a farmer who sows his crop and then waits patiently for the harvest. It would be silly for the farmer to hurry or anticipate the harvest. So Jesus implies that his work will lead to the harvest of divine judgement on the last day, but in the meantime there has to be a patient waiting in the confidence that the work of the Gospel will come to harvest.

The parable teaches us three things:

1. This parable is primarily about Jesus’ work. It informs us that he is not only the one who sows the Kingdom of God, but he will also bring the process to completion by putting in the sickle of divine judgment
2. We also see from this parable that Jesus does not have total control over the coming of the kingdom. Like the farmer, he has to wait for the sown seed to come to fruition. In Jesus’ teaching about the future there is the same note; ‘no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the son, but only the Father’. Jesus like the farmer, having sown the seed, leaves the growth process to God. It is God’s business as to when the harvest time has come.
3. This parable implies the growth of the Kingdom of God. There is an emphasis on the growth of the seed: ‘it sprouts and grows…. First the shoot, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear’ (v.28). It is not the case that the world will get gradually better by a process of spiritual evolution until everything is wonderful. The point here is that the work of the Kingdom of God begun in his ministry would grow and one day be completed – the harvest would come.

SO WHAT?

In his book ‘Conspiracy of Kindness’ Steve Sjogren describes how small acts of kindness done to show God’s love in a practical way are being used in his church community to build God’s kingdom. Using the spiritual principle from this parable, he shows how we only have to sow seed, which is something small and easy to do, and then how we need to trust God to bring the growth.

Evangelism can often feel scary and very risky, something that requires a big effort from us. But this parable seems to challenge this view, it teaches us the concept of ‘low risk, high grace’ – the idea that simple acts of service, or sowing the seed of the Gospel, are ‘low risk’ and that they depend on God to work, which is ‘high grace’.

I remember the story of a previous parishioner of mine who when she was a ward sister used to lead morning and evening prayer for the whole hospital ward. Over the years she had received some amazing letters saying how much patients had appreciated those times of stillness and prayer – some letters came from some surprising people.

Sowing the seed of the Gospel doesn’t have to involve huge gestures. Gentle quiet acts of service are what is required. But we do need to engage in these small acts of kindness, because we are called to be involved in the production of God’s harvest. If we don’t sow the seeds, then there will be no harvest and that would be a tragedy! We have all been given the seed of the Gospel and we need to sow it, every day wherever we find ourselves.

How? Well that is for you to discern in your everyday situation. It could include cooking a meal for someone who is having a hard time, looking after a child for an hour or two, shopping for someone, washing a car for free, buying your next door neighbour a pot plant – the list is endless. Keep on doing many of the things that we have begun during this time of Covid.

Many of you might be aware that Archbishop Justin is coming to Guildford Diocese at the end of September to share the good news of Jesus with our non-Christian friends and families. Many of us, as part of Thy Kingdom Come, have been praying for 5 people. Can I encourage you to continue to pray for 5 as we approach Archbishop Justin’s visit? Why not choose to pray for 5 friends, invite 3 to come and hear Archbishop Justin speak and expect 1 to say ‘yes’.

Let us sow the seed of the Gospel in low risk ways and prayerfully leave it to God to grow and gather the harvest.