

Trinity 2, Year B, June 13 2021

The other evening, I heard an extraordinary story about a father and son surviving an incident that could easily have led to their death. The son was swimming in the sea off the Donegal coast. A river ran into the sea there. The boy got caught in the current from the river and couldn't swim to the shore. His father jumped into the water and swam out to rescue him but both then became caught in the current and disappeared. Twenty-four hours elapsed and fishermen who knew the waters went out to an island some miles offshore and found father and son alive on the island's beach. The son had clung to his father until they reached land.

It's an extraordinary and true story that we can immediately visualise and relate to. Jesus used stories in the same way. To communicate with his audience Jesus told very visual stories - parables – and performed miracles and acts of service in a vivid way. For instance, he helped a blind man to see and he washed his disciples' feet as a sign of humility. The most striking image is that of his death on the Cross, which gives us the sign by which Christians are universally recognised.

This Sunday's Gospel contains two pictures which are aimed at helping us to understand what 'The Kingdom of God' is like. It's not a place like the Roman Empire. Jesus' audience might have found removing the Romans an attractive idea but Jesus rejects obtaining political power. Instead, Jesus envisages that 'the Kingdom of God' refers to *how we allow our lives to be ruled*. Are we, he asks, to be ruled by God or by evil?

In the first of this morning's parables, Jesus takes an image that would have been very familiar to people of his day. Someone sows seed on the ground. Without any effort on his part the sower observes that it grows day by day ('the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.'). Then comes the point where the harvest is made: 'The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

This parable may refer to the fact that Jesus will meet a few people – sow the seed – and only in time will it become apparent what a big effect he has had. The point is that faith in and living by the rule of God doesn't have to begin in a spectacular way. It can begin quietly, almost without your noticing.

The second parable in Sunday's Gospel plays on this theme and takes the image of a tiny seed which grows into a big plant, so big that it offers shade to the birds which makes their nests in it. ['It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.'] This is another way of talking about small beginnings, leading to spectacular outcomes. The story also values smallness and so 'humility' (which means literally 'close to the earth').

The Kingdom begins very small – just a few people hear Jesus' words and react to them – but it keeps on growing, initially unnoticed, until it becomes a great plant. Perhaps, by the time that the Gospel was written, a generation or two after Jesus' lifetime, his followers had experienced this sort of growth in followers. Certainly, if you look at the whole course of the history of the Church, this is how it has been. The Church began with just a dozen followers of Jesus and has grown into what Bishop Michael Curry calls 'the Jesus Movement', with over 2 million followers.

But there is more here. This is not just a story about small beginnings leading to great growth. Jesus points his audience to the virtue of smallness, to humble earthy – beginnings. What is ultimately influential begins in simplicity and humility: it does not force itself on its audience.

We know this to be true from our own life in the South of France. The church in Vence began with a few people gathering at someone's house (and later in a hotel). The church in Nice began two hundred years ago with a small group of benefactors.

This is also true of us. Every individual's faith begins with the sowing of a small seed of understanding and then – if we allow it to do so and tend it properly - discipleship grows with time.

There is yet another part of this Sunday's gospel which is instructive. Jesus' teaching resembles a seed. It may begin growing by teasing and puzzling us into further understanding, into further *growth*. No more than the disciples will we understand it all – or make it our own – just as the seed is planted. We must let it grow and let God's Spirit work within us. We must trust that the small seed of faith will grow and flourish.

Examples of this continue in our own time. Two Scottish brothers (RC as it happens), Magnus and Fergus MacFarlane-Barrow, in their 20s then, responded to the desperate plight of people in Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the era of the break-up and civil war in former Yugoslavia. They were working in their parents' fish farm in Aberdeenshire, and they organised a local appeal for blankets and food. They filled a Jeep with aid and delivered their cargo to Bosnia. They returned to Scotland expecting to resume work as fish farmers, but in their absence their parents' shed had been filled with yet more donations.

Magnus took a 'gap year', to deliver the aid for as long as it was needed, and never returned to his old job. The donations didn't stop – they still haven't – so the project was registered as a charity, then named as Scottish International Relief.

Ten years later, his enthusiasm to make a difference undimmed, Magnus visited Malawi and stayed with an Italian priest who showed him round his parish. They encountered a woman with six children who was dying of AIDS. It was almost unbearably sad, but Magnus asked her eldest child, a boy of 14, what he most hoped for. His reply was food and the chance to go to school.

This led Magnus to found the charity, Mary's Meals, which began by feeding just 200 children a day. Now the charity Mary's Meals works with communities in twelve different countries around the world, providing a meal for over a million children every school day. . A daily meal in school has a positive impact on enrolment, attendance, and performance in class.

This theme of starting small and growing has a relevance to our present situation. We are worried about how our church communities will recover after the pandemic – even *if* they will recover. We should take heart that Jesus values the small and humble, signified by the seed and that the seed once planted will grow.

There is so much in our recent experience to show that growth can come from the most surprising sources. Who would have guessed that Zoom calls might be a source of spiritual growth or that broadcasting services would reach out to those who seldom come, or are even normally able to come to church. In a mysterious way, the pandemic has planted seeds which are only just coming to fruition. We have yet to come to the time of harvest.