



Sermon

Date

His Work and Ours?

Mark 4:26-34

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There is a well-known story of a gardener showing a local minister around his garden. Each time they came to some new plant or flower the minister exclaimed, praise God for the wonder and beauty of His creation. After hearing this a few times the gardener said, "Yes that is all very well but you should have seen it when it was entirely up to Him!

The two stories we have just read seem to give the impression that we don't have much to do with the growth of the Kingdom of God. In this sermon I want to address two questions: What is the Kingdom of God and What part do we play in ensuring that it comes about.

In the gospel of Mark our Lord's teaching is summarised like this, "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the God. The time has come. The Kingdom of God is has come near. Repent and believe the good news." Let's unpack that.

What Jesus means by the Kingdom of God is hard for us to understand because our view and experience of kingship is significantly different from what our Lord's audience would have known. King Charles may well make great pronouncements but that does not mean they will be immediately obeyed. Only parliament can pass laws that all must obey. In our Lord's time, a king was all powerful. His word was to be obeyed by all at all times. It is not so much the geographical area over which God is King, but rather that any place where He is obeyed becomes His kingdom. But this world is not operating under His rule. Rather we live in enemy occupied territory. We live in a world where a defeated ruler still claims he has the power to rule. Now we are being invited to join up with the true King of this world. To change our allegiance from the usurper to the true King. That is what Jesus means by the word "repent". It means change your mind about who you are following in this life. Is it the true King or the Usurper who claims to be in charge.

The two stories tell how the Kingdom is expanding. The answers are quite surprising and show how different the true King's way of doing things is from the Usurper who claims to reign.

The first tells of a farmer sowing seeds and whether he sleeps or gets up the seed grows "All by itself", (verse 28) until the harvest. What Jesus is saying is that the Kingdom will be growing because the King has decreed that it will. He has designed things that way. There are only two things we have to do: plant and harvest.

A few months ago, Ian and a team from here went to a conference in Christchurch. The theme was growing the church. Part of the conference time was taken with analysing the attendance in the congregations represented. To Ian's and the team's surprise what emerged was that our church had grown recently. We had faithfully been going about our work here at St Stephen's unaware that the Master Gardener was also doing His work and the church seems to have grown, "All by itself". Did that mean we had given up teaching, putting on Messy Church, having Sunday school, doing pastoral care? Of course, not but what was not known was that all that work, done in faithful obedience to the King, was bearing fruit.

That is what Jesus is teaching about in this Parable.

But some have taken this to mean that we simply have to faithfully carry on doing what we have always done, and our church will grow. Let me use a few examples of why that is a fatal mistake.

The original preachers of the Gospel were all Jews who had come to accept that Jesus was the long-awaited King. They spoke Aramaic as their native language and Greek as the language of the world in which they live.

Once they went out into the Roman Empire (the world of their day) They used Greek most of the time and later Latin became the language of the church. Why the change? Because they wanted people to understand the message. There is plenty of evidence right throughout the New Testament that this was standard practice in the early church. Paul uses the language of the law courts. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews writes for his Jewish audience. John writes in a different way again. None of the changes of language alter the meaning of the message. It is simply spoken in a way that made sense to the audience

The same thing applies to the way we do things in our church. Is the Anglican way of worship the only way to honour God? What if we had to do our worship in quite a different way to reach a different group of people? Do our signs make sense to the passer by? As a teenager I had a paper run and had to prepare the papers for delivery outside a church hall. A sign announced that there would be a Eucharist there each Sunday. I thought that they were talking about a new card game because the only time I had seen a word like Eucharist was euchre a card game I had heard of.

None of this is new to you. Over the next few months, we will once again be challenged to examine our way of doing things to ensure that the world we are trying to reach can understand. It is always hard work, but the rewards are well worth it as we see people come into a relationship with the King of kings.

Please note that the farmer had his part to do. He sowed and he harvested in this story. I'm quite sure that he did more than that, but I am not a first century farmer so don't know what else was needed. We have our part to play in the growth of the Kingdom of God. What this story tells us is that the is One with whom we work who enables the growth to happen. We are very much the junior but vital partners in the task.

The second story Jesus tells is a further encouragement to us. It can be summarised as, "Do not despise the day of small things." You may think your part is small and not very important. You may think that you don't have much opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus the King. Be encouraged. The tiniest seed sown will not be wasted by the master Gardener. Let me tell you two stories.

A few years ago, I spent a few days in hospital. Once I went for a short walk along the corridor and then came back to bed. There was a cranky man in one of the beds who said as I walked in, "What's he got to smile about?" I had no idea that I was smiling but apparently it had a negative effect on this man. We never know what we are conveying to those around us. When we get to meet the Lord face to face there will be some surprises as you find out what your faithfulness has produced.

My daughter-in-law tells of some ancestors who faithfully worked in Africa as missionaries. They saw little or no fruit for their life's work. Today however there is a thriving theological college in the place where they worked. Their work was not in vain even though they saw little for their efforts. God did see and was faithfully growing the seeds they planted.

Now let me say one thing that we must NOT do. We must not change the message. Who Jesus is and what He has done for us on the Cross are not open to change. This strange and compelling figure who went around Palestine doing mighty works and ultimately giving His life for us are not up for grabs. The stories about the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus are true and show how God vindicated all that Jesus had done and said about Himself. No matter how strange those stories sound today we are not at liberty to change them.

If you are still in the process of coming to terms with who Jesus is and what His life death, Resurrection, and Ascension mean please don't think it means you don't belong here. You are more than welcome. What we promise to do with all our heart and skill is show you the truth of these things. Ultimately however it is only God Himself who can take our attempts at portraying the truth who will show you what you need to know and believe.

The Kingdom of God has been growing ever since Jesus gave His life for the world He loves. He invites us to join with Him in the work of patiently sowing and harvesting.

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