17 June 2018: Trinity 3B Mark 4:26-34

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

What is the kingdom of God? Quite simply the rule of God in our lives. And it is on the one hand huge and important, but yet the smallest things can be so significant.

The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is like a mustard seed. If you have ever seen a mustard seed then you know what an apparently ridiculous statement this is. They are about the size of a grain of sand. You get literally thousands to the handful. Yet one seed becomes a very large shrub, big enough for birds to build nests in its branches, as the Gospel says.

I questioned that and did a bit of horticultural research of my own, and this is what I found out: Mustard, said my article, is an ordinary-looking little seed with an impressive ability to grow into a mighty plant that is highly prolific. And then it quotes Matthew 13, which says pretty much what Matthew 4 says about it being able to grow into a tree. That big. And I thought about the mustard and cress we grew on cotton wool as children and couldn’t get my head round that. But yes, said my article, it is absolutely possible that some varieties grew into trees in that climate. Ours were just very young seedlings.

The kingdom of God is about small things. The reign of God begins small, says Jesus, but grows. God is at work, even though we often fail to perceive that anything is happening. A tiny seed lies hidden in the soil, out of sight and out of mind. Yet it is active, growing, transforming. We have all had times in our lives when we thought God was absent, missing, dormant, inactive, and it is only later that we realise that God was there all the time.

 And Jesus is not only saying something about God but also issuing a challenge to us. As Christians we understand that imperceptible things can have real influence, but we live in a society that is focussed on bigness. We inhabit a global village. World news, sport and media events demand our attention, justifiably in some cases: North Korea, Syria, World Cups, Royal Weddings, Love Island… but less so in others… We are overwhelmed with huge social problems: world hunger, conflict and child poverty and knife crime.

But as a result of all that, and the facility we all have to focus on those massive issues, we sometimes overlook the tiny seed problems that are at the root of so many difficult situations. It is often the little things that count: viruses the size of a pin head, heart valves the size of a thumbnail, single votes in an election or referendum, a single ill-chosen or well-chosen word.

 Bishop Stephen came on Wednesday evening last week to confirm eight members of our church family, and goodness, the sense of the Holy Spirit moving was amazing. Bishop Stephen was both inspired and inspirational. It’s a bit un-Anglican to harp on about the presence of the Holy Spirit, but if you were there, you will know what I mean…

And Bishop Stephen noticed that many of this congregation on that evening – and the same is true Sunday by Sunday – came to the altar rail to receive a blessing, and he wanted to encourage more of you to come to confirmation, and he told this story about a conversation he had in a similar situation. The wife was being confirmed and he asked her husband why he wasn’t. And the husband said: because my faith is too small. And Bishop Stephen asked: how small? And the husband said: too small.

And Bishop Stephen persevered: well how small is too small, and the man kept saying, somewhat helplessly in the face of the bishop’s persistence, oh just way too small. And then Bishop Stephen played his trump card: would you say then, about the size of a mustard seed? And the man said, well yes, probably my faith is about the size of a mustard seed. And Bishop Stephen said: that’s all we need. Because the rest, of course, is up to God, and God can do great things with people who believe their faith to be very small.

If anyone wants to talk to me about confirmation later or at anytime in the future, please know that I am happy to add you to the new list that was started after that service on Wednesday evening.

Jesus calls us to let the mustard seed of faith do its work for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes, it takes just a little bit of patience to work with people, a little bit of love to redeem a situation, a little bit of grace to bring about reconciliation, a little bit of giving to save a relationship. That is the challenge of the kingdom of God in our lives, in our churches, in our faith and in our walk with God. What tiny little mustard-seed of a thing can we do that will make a kingdom difference to somebody or something?

And just finally, maybe Jesus is also hinting at something about himself in this passage: when God broke into human history to save us, he did not do so with a great army of angels, or a mega computer, or a summit conference of all the rulers of the earth. He did so with a tiny seed planted in the womb of an ordinary young woman. A seed that would one day grow to full size and life, and die for all of us and change the world.

That mustard seed reminds us that life comes out of death. There is no living without dying. There is no resurrection without death. In destruction there is re-creation, in sacrifice there is love and in the man Jesus there is God Almighty: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Amen**