**ITrinity 2 B**

**Ezek 17.22-end**

**Israel Exalted at Last**

22 Thus says the Lord God:
I myself will take a sprig
   from the lofty top of a cedar;
   I will set it out.
I will break off a tender one
   from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will plant it
   on a high and lofty mountain.
23 On the mountain height of Israel
   I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
   and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live;
   in the shade of its branches will nest
   winged creatures of every kind.
24 All the trees of the field shall know
   that I am the Lord.
I bring low the high tree,
   I make high the low tree;
I dry up the green tree
   and make the dry tree flourish.
I the Lord have spoken;
   I will accomplish it.

**2 Cor 5.6-10,14-17**

6 So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— 7for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 10For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. 14For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

**Mark 4.26-34**

**The Parable of the Growing Seed**

26 He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

**The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

30 He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet 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.’

**The Use of Parables**

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

We live in a world where information is available at the touch of a button, and we take it as read that hard data makes for good decisions. Whether it’s the government analysing covid numbers, or any of us checking online reviews before making a purchase, we like to be in possession of the facts. We value honesty and openness in others, and distrust people who won’t give straight answers. So there’s something frankly a bit frustrating about the way Jesus is portrayed in today’s gospel reading. Mark has already told us that Jesus’s mission is to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom, and yet now we hear that he “did not speak to the people except in parables”. Only his closest associates got any kind of explanation, and even they often didn’t understand. And so much of what has come down to us is in the form of these strange little stories, which sometimes seem to hide as much as they reveal.

Wading through the analogies and metaphors can be confusing: what is it about seeds, or children, or sheep that we are supposed to imitate? If the good news of God is spread through hints and rumours, how reliable is it? Why could Jesus not just speak plainly?

It’s clear from the gospel accounts that Jesus was keenly aware of the delicate balance between preaching freely and setting off untimely confrontations. He frequently declined to answer hostile questions from the Pharisees, and sometimes held back information from his own followers if he thought they couldn’t take it. “I still have many things to say to you,” he told the disciples at the Last Supper, “but you cannot bear them now”. But the situation in today’s reading is different. Jesus is speaking to a supportive crowd, thirsty for good news, and offering them a message of hope, not foreboding. So if he chose to speak in parables, perhaps it was because he knew that parables could convey a message that went further than plain speaking.

His hearers would have been familiar with the use of stories as teaching material. Two parallel strands run through the Jewish Old Testament, which might loosely be defined as doctrine and poetry. On the one hand, whole books are given over to rules for good living, enshrining the foundations of the Jewish faith: Leviticus and Proverbs, for example. On the other, the book of Psalms, and the works of the prophets, deal in imagery, metaphor and imagination. Even the 10 Commandments, the defining text of Judaism, has its alternative form in the words that Jesus himself quoted: “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This injunction is so far beyond our human capacity that it’s clearly not a rule in the sense that, say, “Do not steal” is a rule, but a poetic image designed to inspire devotion.

Formal doctrine, as the Jews were well aware, has a vital role in protecting communities from sliding into forgetfulness or heresy. It’s why we say the Creed every Sunday in church, to remind us of the fundamental, shared principles of our faith. But codifying knowledge about God is fraught with danger. It can lead us to the misapprehension that we understand God, or worse, to the idea that we have the right to police other people’s holiness. Jesus was unsparing in his criticism of religious authorities when they burdened the people with regulations designed to restrict access to God. The poetry, prophecy and story-telling of the Bible serve as a counterweight to this tendency. They introduce an imaginative dimension hinting at a mystery beyond what we can comprehend. They open a door to a different kind of understanding, one which accepts both paradox and uncertainty. The truth contained in poems and parables does not pretend to give a total picture; it’s like a window onto a detail of a much bigger view, one which changes depending on the angle of the viewer. It relies on a creative partnership between the words and the listener, requiring us to question, consider, inhabit the storylines for ourselves. Rules keep other people out; stories invite everyone in.

The little stories in today’s gospel reading are both parables themselves, and a picture of the way parables work. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God. And straight away, we come up against the restrictions of language. A kingdom refers to a country or state, a political and geographical entity with laws and boundaries, such as Israel had once been under the rule of David and Solomon. But God’s kingdom is not like that. It transcends space and time, and yet is personal and particular to each of us. The kingdom of God begins with the life of God within us. So these parables play with our understanding, contrasting the apparatus of a state with the simplicity of a seed.

Jesus describes how seeds grow in secret, hidden in the ground. Unaided, they produce roots, stem, leaves, flowers and fruit, containing within themselves all the information they need to develop from insignificant beginnings into large, productive plants. (Mustard, by the way, was notorious for growing wild in the Middle East; according to the Roman writer Pliny “when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.” If you’ve ever seen willowherb growing rampant along railway cuttings, or buddleia bushes sprouting from abandoned buildings, you might get a similar idea.)

We are invited to imagine that prolific seed scattered around, and ourselves as the ground on which it is sown. The kingdom of God, Jesus says, with all its dynamic, creative potential, can be contained within something scarcely visible to the naked eye. A momentary experience, a single sentence yielding a passing insight, is enough to start its growth. But, he goes on, “the earth produces of itself” – that is, the growth of the seed is also shaped by its environment – and so the development of the kingdom is individual to each of us. God’s kingdom is not a monoculture, but a variety as infinite as the people who make it up.

And while the fruits of that kingdom are seen in the lives we live, they draw their sustenance from roots that are hidden, growing in the darkness of the earth. Just as plants can be supported by stakes but will die without healthy roots, our faith withers if it relies solely on a framework of rules and dogma. The reality of God is so far beyond our imagining that our attempts to formulate it will always be partial and distorted. God’s kingdom is nurtured by mystery, in that place where we come face to face with the limits of our understanding, and where poetry and parables let our imagination run free. For it to come to its full fruitfulness, it needs each of us to give space to the stories and images that speak to our hearts of love, life and joy. It’s not that our decisions and actions don’t matter – of course they do – but God’s redemptive power is not limited by our efforts at good behaviour. The kingdom of God is waiting to burst into life wherever the seed falls. If we watch and listen we might start to see the wonder of its unfolding.