

Mark 4:26-34, Ezekiel 17:22-end

Good morning Church. We are scattered around Eindhoven and further afield but we are gathered to worship the Lord our God and to grow in faith and love as we learn to follow our Lord Jesus.

In our reading from Mark's Gospel we have two simple parables about the Kingdom of God which Jesus told his followers. When Matthew tells the stories of the Kingdom of God he calls it the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the same thing but Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience who were very reticent to speak the Lord's name. They avoided it and used Heaven to convey the meaning. For us it is better to speak of it as the Kingdom of God because the Kingdom of God is more about the rule of God, God being King, than about a place.

The coming of the Kingdom of God was the central Good News of Jesus message.

Mark [1:14-15] tells us,

"Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent & believe the good news!"

But there were cultural barriers to people understanding and receiving Jesus as God's Saviour. Many people were puzzled because the popular expectation was that when Messiah came the Kingdom of God would appear all at once.

Many of the people of Jesus' day were expecting God's Saviour to change everything in a cataclysmic event. Messiah's coming and victory would vindicate the Jewish people and bring judgement on the pagan (non-Jewish) nations.

Many people must have been thinking:

Why doesn't Jesus put the world to rights?

If the Kingdom of God is at hand;

Why is the world still in such a mess?

Why is there still so much injustice and oppression?

Why is there still so much sickness and suffering?

"If Jesus really is the one who God has sent to be the saviour, why doesn't everyone believe in Him?"

In the parable of the Sower Jesus had taught that whether the Good News of the Kingdom takes root in people's lives or not depends on how much attention they pay to God's word. He said;

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Isn't just a catchphrase. It is a central theme.
If you want to see God's kingdom come:
Open your heart to receive God's word.
Make room for it to grow in your life.
Accept it and allow your trust in God to develop.
Let the message shape the way you live.
Let the Kingdom of God come in your life.
Choose to keep close to Jesus and go His way.

The Parable of the Sower emphasised our individual responsibility to be careful how we hear and respond to God's word.

This answered the question at the individual level of why people respond differently to the message of the Gospel.

What do the two parables we read today add to what Jesus had already said?

In these two parables we have a complimentary picture of how the Kingdom of God grows.

In the parable of the seed that grows secretly Jesus is emphasising the mystery and the certainty of the growth. It does not mean that the farmer should not plough the land, fertilize the soil and plant the seed.

Some ministers complain about the lack of growth in their congregations and wish that they were somewhere else. I keep a bookmark in my Bible with the words;

"The grass is not greener somewhere else. The grass is greener where it is watered with biblical vision, faith filled expectation and God's blessing."
We ministers are called to be faithful to our calling to teach God's Word.

Jesus was giving a different vision of how God's Kingdom would come. It was not going to be an overwhelming display of power that would crush opposition and take away peoples freedom to choose. The Lord gives us freedom to choose.

In their preaching Jesus and his apostles were sowing the seed of the Kingdom. Once seed is in the ground it often seems as if nothing is happening. It grows in secret whether the farmer stays awake or not. There is a mystery to how the Holy Spirit is at work. The planted seed grows in secret. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." [Jn 3:8] It is God who gives the growth - Growth is natural for the Kingdom of God.

- Growth in Numbers of believers
- Growth in the Fruits of the Spirit in our lives

Sometimes I have had to fill in forms to say how, why and when I became a Christian.

As I reflect on that I find it more difficult to give one time and date. As I look back there have been lots of points where I have made decisions of different kinds to follow Christ. God's work in our lives is a mystery. But what is clear is that God has had his hand on my life since I was a child.

I'm following Jesus and there is no turning back. There is a mystery to the growth of the Kingdom of God in an individual's heart and in the world at large but there is also a certainty to it.

What God has begun he will bring to completion. There will be a harvest time when the Lord our God will establish his rule for all to see.

Some of you may have heard the parable of the Mustard Seed called into question for inaccuracy. Did Jesus make a mistake? Is it true that there are other seeds which are smaller than the mustard seed?

The Mustard Seed isn't actually the smallest seed. Some Orchid Seeds are a lot smaller.

But Jesus was speaking to the first century Galileans within his and their range of botanical knowledge. We don't have to claim infallibility in every area of knowledge for Jesus.

The mustard seed was commonly regarded in Palestine at that time as being the smallest - otherwise people would have challenged him.

Jesus' point is,
Though the beginning of the gospel might seem insignificant and its growth might be slow and hidden, it is sure and will become large & significant.

The shrub Jesus was referring to grew to 4 metres in the area around the Sea of Galilee. It is big enough for birds to nest in. The people of Galilee would have understood Jesus' imagery.

Birds coming to roost was used as a picture of the Nations coming to find shelter. As we heard in the prophecy of Ezekiel [17:23] about the birds coming to find shelter in the noble tree planted by the Lord

I chose [Psalm 84:3] because it felt like a personal promise to Janny and I as we have been looking for a new home in the UK. It also chimed with this aspect of the parable.

I imagine the Psalm writer, in the temple, looking up at one of the niches where a sparrow and a swallow have made their nest and it inspired him to write the Psalm, **"even a sparrow finds a home and a**

swallow builds a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at your altars O Lord of Hosts."

Psalm 91 expresses the same hope;

"He who abides in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say to the Lord, My refuge and my fortress my God in whom I trust." [Psalm 91:1-2]

The growth of the Kingdom of God has been seen in the peoples of the world coming to faith in our Lord Jesus. Making the prayer from Psalm 91 their own and finding God to be their refuge and fortress.

At times life can be very different from what we expected it to be and this calls for patience and perseverance.

There is a beautiful promise and a warning in these parables. "Whoever has will be given more;

Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." [Mark 4:25].

First the warning;

If we do not take Jesus' teaching to heart we will lose what we have already been given.

The Promise - If we treasure His word and make room for His word to take root and grow in our lives we can be confident that the God's Kingdom has come in us and will continue to grow in our lives.

As we put our trust in Jesus, His HS makes us alive to God, and that life within us brings about change and growth. We will see the Spirit's fruit grow in our lives and in the world.

The more we put into practice what we are given the more The Lord gives us.

Jesus' teaching in these parables about the growth of the Kingdom of God is still true. The Gospel is spreading and growing in our hearts and lives, in the congregation and throughout the world.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, teach us to be faithful in change and uncertainty, that trusting in your word and obeying your will we may enter the unfailing joy of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen