

Sermon by Revd Susanna Pain  
14 June 2009

Mark 4:36-42

Creator God,  
For the miracle of life  
silently going on  
around and through us  
every second of the day,  
we give you great thanks  
may we also be wasteful,  
flourishing giver of life and love.  
Amen.

A person scatters some seeds  
goes to bed, gets up...  
the seeds sprout, grow, produce the ear  
ripen...

It's all a mystery ...

The person goes out to harvest ...

there is the waiting

The letting be ... the flourishing –

Unlike the person who tried to help the butterfly spread its wings ...

Too fast, too fast, it takes time for the butterfly's wings to dry, before it  
can fly.

If you keep digging up the seed as some children do, curious to know how it is  
progressing, it will never grow.

It needs the darkness, the quiet, the rest ... It will grow in its own time.

Winter perhaps is such a time for us.

Yesterday I had the miserable s – my nose was running, my throat was sore.

No energy to love, to care, to create, only to rest ..

Good idea, you might say.

Rest.

Maybe winter is a time to rest,

burying the dead seed,

and waiting

in faith and hope

waiting in the darkness for life to come.

To many, Holy Covenant appears flourishing. How is it with you – are you  
flourishing? Fully alive? Existing? Good.

Or are you too busy, tired, sick, overwhelmed – what do you need to flourish?

A rest, some space

sleep

time out ...

I'm afraid I'm between the two ...  
flourishing, yes; and also for now, in need of rest, regrouping ...

On Friday, I prayed:

'Jesus, I am overwhelmed at the moment, fearful of the demands you might make on me, that you might invite all your friends to me – I can't stand it. I want to curl up like my cat, Sally, oblivious to the world ...

I get caught up in a whirlwind. I can never do enough. For now I need to stop, revive, survive ... more than that, to follow you to the quiet place to pray.'

'My dear one', he says 'I love you and would never leave you. When you saw only one set of footprints it was then that I carried you. Stop, reconnect, listen to me, I will show you the way.'

I go into the cave, sit by the fire, curl up and sleep.

Jesus, help me to know who I am, what is my unique call?

Dear God, give me health and rest. I am making time to be with you. Rest me in your still centre.

Jesus, do you accept me as I am?  
Or do you make demands of me?

Jesus says 'I am sitting here. Rest with me. I will watch over you – rest now. Leave the tending to me!

William Loader comments:

*Sometimes we become bogged down with failure, or at least with business. It becomes hard to see the way ahead. We can be tempted to give up. The signs are not good. The two parables defy failure. They assert an optimism.*

*The first is bafflingly simple. It is an example of shifting focus from ourselves to the world of nature around us. It is not really an argument. Where it states that the sower has no idea how the seed grows, we could begin to offer intelligent explanations. That would somewhat miss the point. The parable serves to assert hope despite what seems, at first sight, a rather meaningless exercise: burying the seed! You put dead things into the ground. Of course, we know all about seeds and germination. The parable invites us to believe that God's reign - the good that God will bring and does bring - will happen.*

*The image of sowing and harvest has its roots in biblical tradition as a way of speaking of God's future action. It also inspires the parable of the mustard seed. We can correct the claims about the mustard seed being the smallest. This is clearly not the case. It also hardly qualifies*

to win the prize of being the biggest shrub, let alone, becoming a tree. None of that is relevant to the point it is making, which is one of contrast: between what we see now and what we will see.

People have often wondered whether Jesus invented these parables to defend his ministry against the charge that it had achieved little success. His cross hangs a much larger question mark over his life. Mark asserts the notion of growth. At least with growth you can see some achievement. You can acknowledge process.

There is a sense in which these parables belong to notions of resurrection. They also have parallels in many of the world's religions and philosophies which hail the dying and rising of winter and spring or the dying seed and the sprouting green as a paradigm for hope in life. This should not surprise us. It is the common ground we share with all who see life as something positive and live it with hope.

There is distinctive shape to this hope. It is more than unreflected optimism. Part of its substance appears already in the parable of the mustard seed, where the coming of the birds may serve as imagery for the gathering of the nations. Jesus' preaching about the kingdom belonged within Jewish faith about change and hope which, at its best, was radically inclusive. Jesus showed that in his life. The coming of God's reign was a way of talking about an overcoming of powers that oppressed people, whether as individuals or as communities. It would be good news for the poor and hungry. Its goal was not a state of individual bliss, but a community of justice and peace.

The parables take on new dimensions when we see that they are both biographical and paradigmatic. It wasn't just that Jesus had a positive attitude. He laid his life on the line in compassion for others and in a profound sense, gave and gained life, as he gave it. It was paradigmatic because it confronted other models of meaningfulness and spirituality by asserting that nothing less than the life lived in compassion is the way we find ourselves, find God, and find others - we find all three in the same place!

Our passage ends with Mark's explanation - or perhaps an explanation handed on to him. It could sound very self-congratulatory. Of course, we - the disciples - know; outsiders don't. Mark quickly subverts any notions of self-congratulation as he soon begins his portrait of the disciples as far from understanding and hooked on a diametrically opposed value system. These closing words also contain clues about the parables and how they worked. Effective parables are like effective metaphors or images. They invite our imagination to jump forward to new understanding, simply by putting before us a contrast or a paradox. The "penny drops" or it doesn't. It is a much less controlled and controlling way of communicating than explanation and solid argument. Parables are not really meant to obscure meaning; they are

*meant to open it up, but for those wanting explanations they can master - they are frustrating.*

*Asserting hope can be rather meaningless unless we have some experience of fulfilment in the here and now. Without it, it is probably not even possible to hope. Certainly Jesus' word about future hope - which some today wish he had never uttered or deny that he ever uttered - never came true for the most of the poor and hungry. Yet in another sense they became real in the lives of many of his contemporaries and are still real today. We live in the tension between hope-informed life and love in the here and now, and increasing exposure to the hopelessness which many people face. There are no short-cuts; and quick-fix divine interventions are no longer on the agenda for most people. There is a big picture which can only ever come partially into view. Parables such as those of our passage do not serve us well if their message is reduced to naive optimism. Set within the pain of their context, they are much more realistic. They encourage us to defy hopelessness and to believe that nothing will serve the interests of those surround us, our planet and ourselves, better than to allow ourselves to be part of God's reign, or in less "realmy" terms, God's life and love in the world.*

*(First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary-  
Pentecost 2 – by William Loader)*

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