

Sermon Mark 4: 26-34

'How shall we picture the Kingdom of God...it is like a mustard seed; when sown in the ground it is smaller than any other seed, but once sown, it springs up and grows taller than any other plant'. In one of the bible's best-known illustrations, Jesus talks about the great things that can be achieved if faith is only the size of a mustard seed – the smallest of seeds. When we talk about faith, it can come across as rather daunting – as an enormous undertaking requiring great effort and conscious belief – many people have been brought up in this understanding of 'big faith'. But here Jesus seems to be talking about mustard seed faith – what initially seems like 'little faith', but which has the power to transform and do the seemingly impossible. These minute beginnings are the means by which God's Kingdom will be recognised among us.

Many of us tend, perhaps, to think of Faith with an initial capital – as something you either have or don't have; a gift which descends fully formed upon the recipient, complete with an armoury of responses and rebuttals to every challenging question; every life situation. Someone with proper, big faith believes all the doctrines, all the right things; doesn't doubt. But does anyone really possess this kind of faith? The faith we see active in the Gospels seems rather to be about a more gradual process of deepening experience and trust. When Jesus calls the disciples, his call doesn't take the form of outlining a series of commitments, promises and beliefs they must agree to in order to sign up. Instead, he simply invites them to 'Come, follow me.' None of the disciples can know what is involved in that 'yes', and neither can we - but the affirmation signals an openness to trust in the one who calls. It is only through the practise of trying to live out that belief in the reality and goodness of God day after day, month after month, year after year that we can begin to understand where that journey takes us. And the Gospels show us how the 'little' faith of a group of fishermen following Jesus is the mustard seed which is transformed into a faith which will change the world. 'Upon this rock I will build my church', Jesus proclaims to Peter.

Who can know the journey that coming to church, baptism, confirmation - or ordination - may take us on? That faith can steal up on us gradually; that we are not required to transform *ourselves*; or comprehend the workings of the

Holy Spirit, only to be open to it, willing to try to follow: 'little, mustard seed faith' strikes me as a consoling concept. And whether someone regards themselves as religious or not, there's an implicit faith in any important commitment we make; a saying 'yes' to a relationship or decision whose outcome we cannot predict: bringing up a child, entering into marriage or partnership; embarking on a new career; moving somewhere new. Each is surely an affirmation of faith, hope and love - a willingness to risk vulnerability, often again and again; the courage to trust in the power of good.

There seems to be a tension in this chapter of Mark about the extent to which as individuals we can shape our faith; and the extent to which the initiative is from God. The passage before our gospel reading will be known to many: it describes the different ways in which faith is received - again using the analogy of the harvest. For some, the seed - the word - falls on stony ground; for others, it never takes proper root; for others, it grows, but is then strangled by thorns and thistles - the cares of the world: and for a few it falls on good soil and bears much fruit. The implication here is that individuals bear a responsibility for the quality of their response to Christ. Yet the stress of both parables in our gospel - that of the sower and the mustard seed - are on the divine initiative and lack of human influence in the process of growth: the assurance that the Kingdom of God will come to be known in its fullness. Mark's gospel also emphasises the hiddenness of Jesus' message; that only a chosen few are able to understand his purpose, whereas many will not 'see' or 'hear'. But our reading also emphasises that hiddenness is not the last word and transparency will surely follow: a lamp belongs on a lampstand, for 'nothing is hidden except to be disclosed and nothing concealed except to be brought into the open.' In God's own time, though we cannot - and do not need - to understand when or how, all things will be made known and the Kingdom of God will arrive.

Our world, secular as well as religious, abounds with the fruits of mustard seed faith; commitment and trust in what is possible despite the path not being clear or certain. Look at the development of the Covid vaccines: it would have been easy to dismiss the idea of producing a successful vaccine from scratch within months as impossible, given that it has taken years before now. Yet those behind the development had faith in the project: though they could not

be certain it would succeed, they believed in it; made a commitment to it, without knowing exactly how the end would come about. On a more individual level, undertaking a great challenge - a marathon, a degree, a vocation of any sort, campaigning for something we feel passionately about - often seems to start with a decision. It's a leap of faith in a sense; almost invisible on the outside, like a mustard seed - but which shapes the course of events, its enormous significance only revealed in reaching a goal that at the time seemed so daunting.

'With God, nothing is impossible' - but in this life, in the world we inhabit, it is only too clear that all is not right; that tragedy and injustice as well as joy and consolation are the lot of many. Simply having faith does not, as we know, guarantee concrete success or insurance against suffering. Faith seems rather about trusting that God holds us in love amidst darkness and in light; in the face of those things which are for the moment inexplicable and can feel almost unendurable.

I sometimes think of faith as rather akin to 'the ministry of turning up' - not because God rejects us if we don't wish to seek Him (or the possibility of Him if our faith is uncertain) - but because the decision to respond to God opens ourselves to the reality of his love. The act of seeking seems to be the means of healing: so often Jesus tells those who have come to him 'Your faith has healed you.' Think of the woman in Luke's gospel who washes Jesus' feet with her tears; whose 'sins are many'; the woman who has suffered haemorrhages for twelve years; the centurion whose servant is gravely ill. The moral status; the degree of orthodoxy of those who come to Jesus seems unimportant; all that matters is that they have sought him as they are. 'I believe; help my unbelief', is the reply of a father to whom Jesus declares 'Everything is possible to one who has faith' (Mark chapter 9). Full of doubt, he has nevertheless made the decision to approach Jesus to seek healing for his tormented son, and who Jesus makes well. The Prodigal Son needs only to seek his father to be enveloped in his love; the act itself witness to his turning around; his repentance. And seeking God may feel like 'our' decision: yet its agency is surely mysterious and impossible to fully comprehend, like the scattered seed that grows overnight- how we do not know.

Can we also believe ourselves loved like those who encounter Jesus in the gospels; trust that God is always with us, on our side; cares for us more than we do for ourselves? That's mustard seed faith. What might be possible in our lives, in this church, in our society, if we treasure, tend and nurture that faith, trusting that God will do the rest in His own way and time? Amen.