

When I was about 10, I was given a small packet of mixed flower seeds. I am not sure why, and I am not sure that I even remember who gave them to me, but I do remember being given, or allocated a small piece of the flower bed that run along the side of our house so that I could plant the seeds. I remember digging up the soil and planting the seeds. We didn't know what would grow and what wouldn't – or even what to expect as the seed packet just said mixed seed. The deal was though that I had to water and weed them. I am not sure whether I had help or not, but I do remember that tall purple flowers came up, and that there were also pink and white flowers too. I still don't know what they are called, but I remember the joy of seeing the little green seedlings start to grow, and the excitement of waiting to see what flowers they might be. For years those flowers seemed to continue to come up in that part of the garden, they must have seeded well.

Last year we did a similar thing the garden outside the rotunda window, and in the vicarage drive way – a friend and I were cleaning the garage and found some seed packets which the slugs had eaten the pictures off – we sprinkled them in the gaps and this spring we had the wonderful crop of forget-me-nots.

Sometimes great expectations grow from small seeds – sometimes we know what to expect – sometimes we do not. Many of us in this church today will be able to think of seeds we have planted and the crops we have grown.

The community in which Jesus worked and spoke understood very clearly the experience of planting seeds and waiting for things to grow. They understood the reality that sometimes crops didn't grow and they went hungry – they also understood that God could provide abundantly for them from just a very tiny seed.

Jesus uses this knowledge today to help his knew followers understand what the kingdom of God can be like. The first parable we hear in Mark today is contained in no other Gospel – one commentator suggested that this is because it is so boring – in fact it is less a parable and more a statement of fact. Everything proceeds according to plan. Jesus simply speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do. They grow and produce. Moreover, they grow and produce without your help or your intricate knowledge of germination or photosynthesis – they just grow.

In other words, the reign of God will take root -- whether in the world, in imperial society, or in someone's heart, Jesus does not specify. It will grow gradually and automatically (the New Revised Standard Version renders automate in Mark 4:26 as what the earth does "on its own"). It will grow perhaps so subtly that you won't even notice, until at last it produces its intended fruit¹.

Unlike the parable of the sower later in the gospel, the seeds in this parable just grow – God is planting the seeds of hope and justice and faith – all the time – and all seeds have the potential to germinate!

There is something reassuring about what Jesus is talking about here. Somethings just are. It is the nature of God's reign to grow and to manifest itself. That's what it does. As a lamp belongs on a lampstand (Mark 4:21-22), God's reign, like a seed, must grow, even if untended and even if its gradual expansion is nearly impossible to detect.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3676

In comparison to the clear statement of fact in the first parable, the story of the mustard seeds seems almost over detailed.

At first glance, this parable reaffirms things people have already learned about God's reign: something very small will eventually morph into something much larger; also, something that appears obscure and insignificant will turn into something public and grand. Yet there is more: the reign of God won't just grow for the sake of looking pretty, but creatures will find that it provides them shelter and security.

But there is something in this parable that may not seem as evident. In the area where Jesus lived and worked mustard was prolific – it would be like one of us talking about ground elder – you don't have to nurture it – it just comes up as a weed everywhere whether you want it to or not!

Matt Skinner, a theologian from Luther Seminary, describe it like this – in this *metaphor the reign of God apparently isn't much of a cash crop. Yet it grows. It is not easily eradicated. Good luck keeping it out of your well-manicured garden or your farmland. Better be careful what you pray for when you say, "Your kingdom come..."*

He suggests that Jesus audience would be laughing at the use of mustard as a metaphor for God. But it points us to something that even today we might feel uncomfortable. These two parables held together remind the audience of two things, firstly God is, God is present, God is planting (whether we see God or not) in fact is as evident as a prolific seed – and more than this – the seed of God – like most seeds – doesn't need knowledge to grow – it just grows.

So what does this say to as a community that prides itself on knowledge and theology? What does it say to the church which is focused on the proliferation of the gospel? As I was talking about this with Fr Laurence during the week – I commented that I think I have reflected myself out of a job!

But I don't think that is the motive behinds Jesus parable, though I think Jesus is challenging those of us who think that God requires humanity to share the message of hope.

So much of what makes Mark a theologically compelling narrative resides in the confusion and mystery that propel the plot forward. Jesus generates amazement but also misunderstanding. Apparent insiders stumble along and abandon Jesus in the end, while some characters from the margins demonstrate an unlikely capacity for faith and recognition.

These two parables therefore exercise an important function when Mark creates a crisis of confidence among its readers. The parables insist that the reign of God will not remain secretive forever, nor does its ultimate emergence depend on humanity's ingenuity, social engineering, piety, moral virtue, or even spiritual cleverness. It exposes and ultimately replaces systems of dominance and servitude; but rather a new leaf which planted where God is hopeful and just society.

It is important that much of Jesus ministry is not just challenging how people encounter God, but also their expectations about how society is constructed. Jesus is challenging the need for the societal structures which mean some have power over others, and where injustice is seen as normal.

Mark's gospel while the shortest and most direct is often the most complicated as it challenges us to step out of our expectations about what faith, God and even Christian community might look like.

Today we open our church for open studios and gardens. We will have many visitors today who will come into this space for the first time. Some will come to look at the art, some the garden, some the building. Some will be curious about how this can be a church, and what that even means. The challenge when we meet these many expectations is to not narrow it to the lowest common denominator. The challenge of today's gospel however is for us to have the courage to step outside of the expectations and to share the fullness and abundance of God's love, and hospitality. No matter how we present some will have their expectations fulfilled and others will be surprised. We can only have faith that God continues to plant seeds, despite or maybe in- spite of, our best intentions!

Mark's Jesus did not assure followers of straight answers – in fact as we have heard often he confused the situation. Knowledge is so often Power, and Jesus continues to challenge who has power, and how those with power exclude others. Open Gardens and Studios is a chance for us to be present as ourselves in a very public way within our community. The parable of the seeds reminds us that we don't need to be anything more than we are, mustard was a weed and yet Jesus still used it as an example of the strength of God. One of the other jokes or challenges the image of the mustard plant is that it is not a proud tree – rather it is untidy and a little unsightly – a bit like buddleia before it gets its flowers. Jesus doesn't see this as a problem. As much as we might want to show ourselves at our best today, our gospel also reminds us that Gods sees us even if we are a little unsightly, and we should be confident to let others see our faith in this way too.

Today we may be surprised at the seeds we see take root, or the places that we see God at work, the challenge of course is to have the courage to let it be, and not try to control but rather continue what God is doing. The readings today remind us that God is constantly with us, and at work in and around us – even if we ourselves might struggle with what has been planted. Maybe this week we can take time to notice what God is growing and planting within us – and respond accordingly. Amen.