

Seed song

It's always a problem when you try to talk about God, the ways of God and the things of God. How can human language do justice to this one who we call Father (and even Mother), Maker of the heavens and the earth? How can mere human words begin to nail down the eternal Word by whom all things came to be? No wonder the great reformer John Calvin described all our God-talk – something he engaged in a great deal – as mere baby talk. Sometimes when you try to speak too directly about God you miss the mark completely.

Well, Jesus had a solution to this. Rather than aim his language straight at God, he instead told stories, stories about God, stories about God's rule that we call the Kingdom. They are known as parables and they are an oblique, indirect way of trying to disclose something of God's truth and mystery. The thing about parables though is that while many of them are short, they pack a punch and they never cease to address us at different times and in different contexts.

Take our parables this morning, about seeds, and let's take the second one first, the one about the mustard seed. This, says Jesus, is the smallest of all seeds on earth and yet it becomes the greatest of all shrubs, putting forth large branches in which the birds make nests in its shade. And I guess we know what this story is all about – or at least we think we do. It's about how big things come from small beginnings, how large oaks come from small acorns. And that's a nice lesson because we often don't feel that we have much to give, that our contribution to the work of God's realm is very limited but, praise the Lord God can make big things happen from small resources. And that makes for good children's addresses, that God can make much from littleness. The danger however with this interpretation is that we miss the real force of the parable and that is because our focus is on the seed rather than the shrub. And the thing about the mustard shrub is that it is a large, ungainly bush that spreads like topsy and can be a real nuisance. The nearest equivalent that I can think of is bindweed which will take over your whole garden unbidden – except that bindweed has a beautiful flower where the mustard bush is ugly and scrawny. And in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel the people of God are likened to a cedar in which the birds nest – a beautiful, strong, towering tree from which ornate furniture is crafted. And Jesus deliberately takes that image from Ezekie

but he subverts it beautifully, portraying the new people of God not as a cedar or an oak but as a mustard bush! Gee, thanks Jesus! And the birds that nest in it are likely to be a right pest, a nuisance to all the cultivated land round about. And Jesus here is reimagining, re-portraying the people of God. And just think how different things might have been if the church had seen itself not as a cedar, a pillar of society, but as a weedy bush, uncontrollable, often popping up where it's not wanted and hosting all manner of undesirables. And how might that image speak to us today when in this part of the world the old church cedar is falling? Behold the mustard bush!

And that brings me to this other parable about the plant that just grows. The farmer scatters the seed and then goes to bed and while he sleeps this life is germinating in the soil, burrowing, pushing up, alive. And the farmer can do nothing. Yes, he can water the soil and he can add fertilizer but he can't make things grow. That just happens. We plant and we water but God gives the growth and that is a picture of God's realm.

It's interesting, isn't it, the language we use about God's Kingdom. We talk sometimes about bringing in the Kingdom, or even building the Kingdom - as if we could do that! Think of William Blake: that stuff about his sword not sleeping in his hand 'til we have built Jerusalem on England's green and pleasant land.' As if! In the Bible the new Jerusalem is not a human project - it is pictured as coming down from heaven, pure gift of God, not rising from the earth by human effort. And we can plant seeds of the kingdom. We can do our works of mercy and compassion and we can fight for justice and we can preach the Gospel, but only God can make these grow such that earth comes to reflect heaven and God's Kingdom comes among us. And of course to that end we can also pray for there is this mysterious connection between the coming of God's rule and the prayers of God's people.

There is, however, one other thing we can do to accompany the growth of the Kingdom, something else that keeps pace with God's rule, and it's something very relevant to this morning's service. We can sing, for song goes hand in hand with God's realm. What a pity we don't have time this morning to do a Bible Study on song in the Scriptures, because if we did we might go back to the first recorded song in the Bible, and what is it? Well, it's the song that is found in the Book of Exodus chapter 15 and it was sung by Moses and the Israelites at the exodus, when the Israelites came up out of the waters of the Red Sea as they escaped from Egypt. And Moses' sister Miriam repeated the

song and the other women accompanied her with tambourines and they danced, and we quoted from the song at the beginning of the service:

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea...”

And why do they sing? Well, they sing because there are certain things that can only be sung, for words are not enough. Certain things need to be voiced in song, and salvation and the Kingdom are among them.

And if we were to continue our Bible Study we would come eventually to Psalm 137, one of the saddest psalms of all. The situation there is that God’s people who were saved from Egypt have now entered a dark period in their lives when they have been conquered and leading citizens have been taken away into exile in Babylon. And in that psalm the Babylonians say to the captives, ‘sing for us! Sing one of those song of yours!’ But the one thing the exiles cannot do is sing.

‘By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion...’

And they hung up their harps on the willow trees for they couldn’t even play let alone sing, and there comes that haunting refrain, ‘how can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’ With the exodus a distant memory; with our deep homesickness for Jerusalem and with salvation and liberation so far away, how can we sing?

But if we were to go on we would come to our beautiful passage from Isaiah 55 from which we read earlier. And there the exile in Babylon is over and the Jews are coming home. It’s like the exodus all over again, and look: now the exiles sing and dance their way through the desert to Jerusalem and to home, and as they do so all creation joins in as the mountains burst into song and the trees of the field clap their hands. For here is redemption and redemption can only be sung.

And our Bible Study would end – where? Well it would end in the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation chapter 15 where – guess what? – Moses song reappears. And it’s sung by God’s triumphant people, quote: ‘beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses... ‘Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty!

There God’s people praise with harps in their hands – no longer hung on willows – for now song and instrument combine for the last and final

exodus, the final homecoming, where salvation and liberation are complete in the joy of the Kingdom. For there are certain things for which words are not enough. They can only be sung.

Or put it this way. Go back to the beginning of the Bible, the first chapter of Genesis and we find there that God speaks the creation into being. In the beginning God spoke and it was. When God creates God speaks. But when God saves, when God redeems, God sings and all creation sings with him. Some things can only be sung.

If I may return one more time to C S Lewis' Narnia Tales, in the book *The Magician's Nephew* there is a wonderful description of the creation of Narnia, Lewis' imaginary world, as it's witnessed by a group of travellers including a boy called Digory. The passage begins in the dark:

'in the darkness something was happening at last. A voice began to sing. It was far away and Digory found it hard to decide from which direction it was coming. It seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes it almost seemed as if it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth itself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard...' And the passage goes on to describe how that voice was joined by other voices, more than could be counted, in harmony but further up the scale: cold, tingly, silver voices. And suddenly the blackness is blazing with stars – single stars, constellations, and the stars themselves seem to be singing. And the voice rises and swells to a climax as the sun rises and it seems to laugh for joy as it comes up. And as it rises the place where the travellers are standing becomes visible, a valley of earth of many colours which made them feel excited until, as the passage concludes, 'you saw the Singer himself, and then you forgot everything else. It was a Lion, Huge, shaggy and bright, it stood facing the risen sun. Its mouth was wide open in song...' And of course the Lion is Aslan, the Christ figure.

Creation is spoken into being, but salvation is sung. That seed of the Kingdom, germinating, growing silently is accompanied by song. And you might say that singing never changed everything, but don't be too sure. Every liberation movement has its songs and ours is no exception. From Moses to Miriam to the great hymns of the Christian church, and the blues and the spirituals and gospel – these are our liberation songs. And today in this service we celebrate one ministry of music and song that has inspired and sustained

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this congregation for the past 18 years. And we give thanks because - to go back to where I began – while so often our words fall short and miss the mark, our hymns and our anthems often get us closer.

So let's close by returning to that mustard bush, that sprawling, invasive scrub that is Jesus' picture of the kingdom. Look up there in its branches and what do we see? We see the birds nesting in its shade. That's us. And listen – what are they doing? They're singing. Amen.

Almighty and loving God,
we praise you, God of big things,
God of the galaxies and the constellations,
God of the stars and of vast empty space;
and we praise you, God of small things,
God of the seed and the sparrow,
God of the hair on the head that is numbered.
All praise, honour and glory be unto you.
And we praise you who have made yourself small in Jesus,
coming to us like a seed planted in the earth,
and from which there grows the church,
set in the midst of the world to be a place of shade
and rest and release.
All praise, honour and glory be unto you.
O God, forgive us for our failures as your people.
Forgive us for the ways in which we stifle
and smother the growth of your Kingdom.

Forgive us for the ways in which we make it difficult
for people to find welcome and rest in our shade.
Forgive us for the ways in which we are unfruitful.
O God of grace, you promise us forgiveness
and you persevere with us and offer us new opportunities.
Grant us your Spirit, we pray,
that your Kingdom may be planted and may grow
here among us.
For we pray in Jesus' name and we pray together in the
words he taught us, saying...

O gracious God,
We give thanks today for the gifts of music and song,
for inspiration and creativity and the ability
to express ourselves and our deepest emotions
with musical instruments and with our voices.
We pray for composers and musicians and singers,
that they may bring beauty to the world
and that in their creativity something of you,
the Creator might be glimpsed.
We pray that above the noise and clamour of an often
discordant and ugly world, our spirits might be lifted
and human life dignified by music and song.
And bless our ongoing ministry of music here in this Church
as we pray for the choir and for musicians,
and for Olja, and for Richard soon to replace her...

And in this country and city especially we give thanks for artists,
for painters and the wonder of their gifts,
and we pray for all who express themselves artistically
and who disclose to us something of
the depths and riches of your creation and who help us to view
the world in a new way...

And God, we pray for the growth of you Kingdom in our midst.
We pray that for justice and for peace in our society,
and for a spirit of compassion and mercy,
and we pray that you would give growth to our church.
Give us grace of plant seeds of love and grace
and the seed of the Gospel and may you be at work
giving them growth.

May we truly be a place where all are welcome
and no-one a stranger, but somewhere where many
find rest in our branches...

And we pray for a moment for those in our fellowship
in special need, and especially for our sister Christa
in the loss in the past few days of her mother.

God, bless her and her sisters and her family.
May they know the comfort and hope of the Gospel.
We pray all these things in Jesus 'name. Amen.