

Dear brothers and sisters,

Recently, I was in the car with my 8-year old niece in the back seat. While we were driving, she was looking up to the skies, seeing all sorts of shapes and figures in the clouds coming by.

A tiger, a princess, a little dog, a crocodile, an entire circus...

A few days later, I came across an online course titled “seeing clouds”. It basically came down to this: look up to the clouds and try your best to see shapes and figures!

The course was meant as a joke of course, but you can imagine what they were trying to get at: Lying on your back in the grass, looking up to the skies. Not just seeing white and blue, but seeing shapes and figures in the clouds.

With the purpose of seeing more than meets the eye.

And that’s what I had to think of when reading today’s scriptures. Today we won’t be taking a course on “seeing clouds” but a course on “seeing the Kingdom”.

A course on “seeing the Kingdom” assumes that it isn’t easy to just witness the kingdom. And you surely agree. The kingdom, what is it exactly? Is it here and now, with us? Is it in heaven, later? Or maybe a new earth?

People have been occupied with these questions for centuries, so we probably won’t get a clean-cut answer today, but in the bible, the kingdom is often explained by the use of images and parables. And today these images are coming to us.

The kingdom is like a twig taken from a tree, says Ezekiel. The kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed, says Matthew.

So we should find it in the little things. That seems to be the first lesson of our course.

The reading from Ezekiel doesn't stand by itself. We should explore the context to properly understand it. The writer of this book is a representative of the people in Babylonian exile. And that is clearly visible in the book full of visions. There is a real struggle with reality. This is about a small people facing a powerful ruler; where people seem untrustworthy, leaving the Israelites hopeless, not knowing where to look. In all that confusion, Ezekiel comes with images of hope for recovery and return.

The twig mentioned in verse 22 – of which God says he will break it off and plant it elsewhere – refers to a story mentioned earlier in the chapter. There as well, God's people is symbolised by a twig, broken off and planted again. But there it's not by God, but by the Babylonian rulers. They had taken the Israelites and "planted" them in another country. Between strong, tall trees. The great, powerful, rich – built by people. But those are not automatically the best trees, says Ezekiel. Not the trees that God wants to flourish and grow.

In this vision, God allows a twig to flourish again in the way that He wants it to. Not out of the strong healthy tree, but from the almost defeated people of Israel, succumbed through all the hopelessness and despair.

And when God plants that small twig, it will grow into a tree full of branches and fruits, and birds will live in that tree – all different kinds of birds.

What a beautiful image for those people in exile: there will be a safe place to live again. In the shadow of the branches of the tree, planted by God himself.

And the same birds are mentioned by Matthew in his parable of the kingdom. They will find a place in the branches of the mustard plant. That mustard plant will come about through a small seed. A tiny one. The sower sows a seed... and then... it is no longer up to him or her. Down in the earth, things will evolve that he has no clue about. A period of waiting arrives.

Two small images. A twig and a mustard seed. Two small images in a world full of huge and overwhelming images. That's no different from today.

Because also in our world today we are overwhelmed by powerful stories and images: thousands of refugees who are drowning at sea. And if they do make it, then what? Is there enough space for everyone? And how about the on-going presence of ISIS, which hasn't been stopped.

Before you know it, you'll be sitting hopelessly on your couch, not knowing where to look. Or you might be sitting in church on Sunday and think: but what now?

What do I actually believe? And what does that have to do with what I read or hear during the week? In the midst of all these raging storms: what can I do, can I even make a difference?

Lesson 1 from our course “seeing the Kingdom” as we find it in the readings today: keep it small, close to home, close to yourself. Those questions are there, sure. The dangers as well. The world is not a safe place for people. And protecting it also has its limits. But don’t let your heart be overshadowed, don’t let evil win by allowing it to conquer a place in your heart. That it becomes so overwhelming that it numbs you...

And I know all too well how hard it can be. And that you might not always succeed.

Because it’s asking a lot from us. It’s asking us to be willing, or even to dare, to look differently at the world around us. Noticing the little things. And appreciating that for its true value.

Sometimes you might see a flower growing out of a crack in the concrete. Such a miraculous image. There is a Dutch poem that mentions this, it’s written by Okke Jager. One of my favourite poems. He writes how a crocus is showing the concrete where its boundaries are.

A characteristic of concrete is that it’s large, massive, heavy. Unstoppable when it’s coming at you.

But then there is the crocus. Precious, small, easily swept away by a gust of wind. But here it's beauty against the background of the concrete, it makes you wonder. Who is actually stronger?

The massive concrete that seems to defeat anything that comes into it's way. Or the flower that shows us how life and beauty will always find their way? I believe the flower is like Gods kingdom against the background of the powers of evil and darkness.

From powerful and overwhelming to small and vulnerable. Are you with me, seeing the kingdom?

I believe that Malala, the 14 year old girl who was fighting for girls education, but who became such a great threat to the Taliban that they shot her, is like the flower showing the concrete its limits.

I recently was attending a service for mentally disabled people. I sat next to a woman who was not able to talk. Instead, she gave me a kiss, showing me I was welcome. She was the flower in a world that doesn't always welcome people.

The Turkish couple in Syria who, at their wedding, did not just serve food to their own guests but also to 4000 refugees last year, are the flowers against the concrete of toughness and xenophobia.

And the flame of the candles that are lit all across the world shows darkness where its boundaries are.

So small, so incredibly tiny, that it needs our protection.

Is all darkness gone with this flame? No.

Is the future of all refugees saved by these initiatives? No.

Will I always feel unconditionally accepted because of that one kiss? No.

We're thinking too big again.

We are moving away from the little things. These small examples are the ones that keep us alive. They keep our faith alive – believing that people are not the ones who ultimately the ones in power, but God is. God who sees all these different birds on earth, who knows the smallest one by name. God who lets the smallest seed in the ground grow in its own way. Until the day of harvest. One day, when there will finally be an end to oppression, to despair. And how that will unfold God showed through His son Jesus Christ.

Jesus always took the small road. Always went the opposite way. Not forwards but backwards, not the way to gain a hero status, but the silent path of humiliation. Not up, but down. Into the earth, like a mustard seed. To die in the earth and rise again like the grain. So that we can live.

His way was downwards, it was about the small people, he showed us even into death. Through his death and resurrection, a new world opened up to us. With his coming, the kingdom started and we were given new eyes to see the twigs and the carefully growing shoots. His life, his death, and his resurrection is the only ground on which we can be protected from fear and hopelessness.

A course on 'seeing the kingdom' cannot just be taught here on a Sunday morning. We're only getting started. I am curious what you will come across this week. Share it, because we need each other in this process of growth, we need each other here on earth.

Teach each other to see and share your stories, because to this end we have been given one another.

Amen.