

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE

13th JUNE 2021

INTRODUCTION

I love this time of year! The heavy Summer heat has not yet arrived (I say that in hope!), but outside everywhere you look life is bursting forth – in the ripening crops, in the playful song of birds ... in the weeds which just refuse to be beaten! To me it all speaks powerfully of joy and the power of life-in-Creation.

Little wonder that people have always turned to Nature for pictures of the power of God's creative force in our lives, too. Jesus spoke often of the life contained in tiny seeds. And St Paul hints at similar images: if anyone is in Christ, he writes – new Creation! It is as if the power of God's New Creation, central to the Christian hope for our futures, reaches into our present when Christ enters the frame.

Of course, what the rhythm of the Seasons makes so clear is that the Spring and Summer of new life must follow on from the Winter. For many if not most people, the past year has felt like a prolonged Winter, with a huge sense of loss – around and within. But it is precisely in the Winter of our lives that God comes to us with his promise: "If anyone is in Christ - new Creation!"

So as you settle down to worship, before you read any further, spend a moment becoming conscious of whatever in your life feels like Winter right now. Offer all of that to God. And receive his promise that, as the Spring shoots rise from the seeds which have been buried in the cold Winter earth, so Christ's new creation will by the mercy and power of God spring up in the soil of your life, too.

CALL TO WORSHIP

From the rising of the sun
till its setting in the west,

God's Holy name be praised.

On the lips of children,
by babies at the breast,

God's Holy name be praised.

In the visions of the old
and the dreaming of the young,

God's Holy name be praised.

In the banquet hall of heaven
and the forgotten corners of our hearts,

God's Holy name be praised.

Let all that has life and breath
Praise the Lord.

Amen.

We Praise the Lord.

TURNING TO GOD

Lord,

**You have given us so much love,
but we have not always accepted it.**

**You have shown us how to love,
but we have not always learned it.**

**You have told us whom to love,
but we have not always done it.**

**You have told us the cost of love,
but we have not always been willing to pay it.**

We are sorry for not understanding your love.

We are sorry for not sharing your love.

We are grateful for the love you offer, even now.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May the God of love and power

Forgive us and free us from our sins,

Heal and strengthen us by His Spirit,

And raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. Amen.

PRAISE

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised,
there is no end to his greatness.

One generation shall praise your works to another
and shall declare your power.

All your works praise you, Lord,
and your faithful servants bless you.

They make known the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your power.

My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord:
let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.

NEW TESTAMENT READING

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 [11-13] 14-17 (New Living Translation)

[Saint Paul speaks of the new life and friendship now possible with God through Christ's death and resurrection]

So we are always confident, even though we know that as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord. For we live by believing and not by seeing. Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord.

So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.

Because we understand our fearful responsibility to the Lord, we work hard to persuade others. God knows we are sincere, and I hope you know this, too. Are we commending ourselves to you again? No, we are giving you a reason to be proud of us, so you can answer those who brag about having a spectacular ministry rather than having a sincere heart. If it seems we are crazy, it is to bring glory to God. And if we are in our right minds, it is for your benefit.

Either way, Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means

that anyone who belongs to Christ – new Creation! The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

Thanks be to God.

Pause for Reflection

Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many years has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

In the grave they laid Him, Love Whom we had slain,
Thinking that He'd never wake to life again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

Up He sprang at Easter, like the risen grain,
He that for three days in the grave had lain;
Up from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

When our hearts are saddened, grieving or in pain,
By Your touch You call us back to life again;

Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

GOSPEL READING

Mark 4.26-34 (The Message Translation)

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

Glory to you O Lord.

Then Jesus said, "God's kingdom is like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without his help: first a green stem of grass, then a bud, then the ripened grain. When the grain is fully formed, he reaps—harvest time!

"How can we picture God's kingdom? What kind of story can we use? It's like an acorn. When it lands on the ground it is quite small as seeds go, yet once it is planted it grows into a huge oak tree with thick branches. Eagles nest in it."

With many stories like these, he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

REFLECTION (by Lindsey Coulthard)

Last week after church I was sent a beautiful photograph. It's a picture of a rose that has climbed a wall and somehow managed to weave itself up and through some guttering. Not only that but it has also managed to produce a head of gorgeous white blooms. It's really quite a sight - and its right under our very noses. Next time you're walking through the church yard, take a look at the right hand side of the porch and there you'll see this glorious little spectacle (*photograph courtesy of Barbara Everett*).

But why I am I telling you this? Because our Gospel reading today is about the mystery of growth, kingdom growth. The parable of the growing seed – or the 'seed growing secretly' as its sometimes called is possibly lesser known as it's so short and often overlooked for the one that follows it – (the parable

of the mustard seed.) And it only appears in Mark's Gospel – not in any of the others. But thank goodness that Mark thought it significant enough to include and especially that we should hear it today as many of us start to 'do' things again and restrictions are slowly lifted.

In this parable, God's kingdom is said to be as if 'someone' sowed or scattered seed and the seed would sprout and grow'. Just as seeds grow, so the kingdom does too. But it would probably make any gardener or allotment keeper raise a sceptical eye brow since it seems to suggest that all you have to do is plant the seed and leave it alone. Now I don't have particularly green fingers but you and I both know that that's not going to yield the best crop. And yet St. Mark suggests that the person who scatters the seed, 'goes to bed and forgets about it.' Job done! We're also told 'he has no idea how it happens.'

There's a children's song that some of you may be familiar with called 'Oats and Beans and Barley Grow.' Does anyone want to give me the next line....[*'Nor you, nor I, nor anyone know how oats and beans and barley grow.'*] I've no idea who wrote it but you could easily believe that the song was inspired by this parable!

At the heart of this story though lies a mystery: the mystery of growth. Of course, the conditions for growth have to be right,

but essentially seeds will grow. It's what they do. Much to *our* frustration – it may often look like there is no growth; or it may feel like growth is taking forever to occur and our impatience might prompt us to poke and prod and intervene to accelerate the growth – but the kingdom of God will grow, it is always growing – that is what it does. We just need to let it. In the book of Isaiah, God reminds the prophet that 'my thoughts are not your thoughts and neither are your ways my ways'.

And so in this story we are reminded that God's time is not our time. If we think that somehow we're able to orchestrate growth in the kingdom of God, this parable stops us in our tracks and seems to down-play our human agency because it's not about what we do, but what the earth does. 'The earth does it all: first a green stem of grass, then a bud, then the ripened grain.'

To most of us, it may feel that we've been largely inactive over the past year or so and for many that may still be a reality but the good news of this parable is that the growth of God's kingdom is still happening all around us. Even if we're unable to see it. His work and reign among us can't be boiled down into a process that we can understand. We have a part in it for sure, but the fruition belongs to God. And that's not to say that we should rest easy or sit back and do nothing; there is plenty of ground work for us to do.

Saint Paul put it like this, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour"

Paul planted and Apollos watered but God alone is responsible for the growth. There's a lot of waiting in kingdom work, waiting for the harvest to be ripe in God's good time. This can be a real challenge for the impatient among us but patience is one of the hardest disciplines of Christian discipleship and one that we've all had to withstand during these times of challenge and change.

We live in a world that's fixated on size and success, on targets and growth; the growth of the national economy is a permanent fixture on the government's agenda at the moment, and the Church nationally is anxious about declining attendance. So this parable might come as something of a surprise, because it speaks of waiting patiently as opposed to planning aspirational growth. The kingdom about which Jesus speaks is altogether quieter; it lies dormant in the ground waiting to produce a tiny shoot, but only when the time is right.

As far as I'm aware, and unless anyone wants to claim responsibility, the rose that I mentioned at the start of this

reflection has grown up and through the guttering strong enough to produce flower heads without and any tending or training. That is the mystery of growth. God's kingdom will come but it is also already here. We just have to look for the signs, then nurture them, and point to them until the whole world sees God's glory and God's love.

Pausing again for Reflection

God, beyond our dreams, you have stirred in us a memory,
You have placed your powerful spirit in the hearts of humankind.

*All around us, we have known you;
All creation lives to hold you,
In our living and our dying
We are bringing you to birth.*

God, beyond all names, you have made us in your image,
We are like you, we reflect you, we are woman, we are man.

All around us,

God, beyond all words, all creation tells your story,
You have shaken with our laughter, you have trembled with our tears.

All around us,

God, beyond all time, you are labouring within us;
We are moving, we are changing, in your spirit ever new.

All around us, ...

God of tender care, you have cradled us in goodness,
You have mothered us in wholeness, you have loved us into
birth.

All around us,

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

In response to what we have heard, we affirm our trust and
faith in God:

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

PRAYERS

Let us pray to the God of heaven and earth
for the growth of the kingdom.

May the kingdom grow
in clusters of Christians all over the world;
may it grow as our hearts are warmed
by encounter with the living God;
nourished by word and sacrament,
private prayer and public worship.
Silence.

Lord of heaven:
let the kingdom grow.

May the kingdom grow
in the crowded streets of cities
and in the scattered rural communities;
in all decision making and all spending.
Silence.

Lord of heaven:
let the kingdom grow.

May the kingdom grow
in every human shelter and home,
from tower blocks to refugee tents;

in every place of work and education,
in each conversation and
in our mutual care of one another.
Silence.

Lord of heaven:
let the kingdom grow.

May the kingdom grow
to bring peace and healing
wherever there is pain or sadness;
to bring reassurance, comfort, courage and hope.
From our own church community we pray for: Geoff Kington,
Paul Burston, David New, Anna Clements, and Adrina and Alan
Price.
And in a moment now we hold before you, those that are on
our own hearts. May they know the healing comfort of your
love.
Silence.

Lord of heaven:
let the kingdom grow.

In the knowledge that we must all face judgement,
we pray for those who have recently died,
and all who mourn their loss.
And we remember with love and gratitude: May Brown, Iain
McBain, Ugo Frascina, Geoff Clarke, and Mick Tudge.

We thank you for your loving mercy
and entrust them to your safe keeping.
Silence.

Lord of heaven:
let the kingdom grow.

As we thank God for all his blessings to us
we offer him the rest of our lives.

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,**

**Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

**May God make us fertile
in faith, love and goodness,
and take us out with joy,
and lead us on in peace,
as signs of the fruitfulness of heaven.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore.
Amen.**

CLOSING BLESSING

**May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.
May He guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.
May He bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.
May He bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.**

SENDING

Now may God
who gives seed to the sower
and corn to the reaper
give to us all that is needed
to produce a good harvest.

*<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/appeals/order-service-song-prophets>
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