

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021**  
**The Second Sunday after Trinity**

**Collect**

Faithful Creator,  
whose mercy never fails:  
deepen our faithfulness to you  
and to your living Word,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Ezekiel 17:22-end**

Thus says the Lord God:

I myself will take a sprig  
    from the lofty top of a cedar;  
    I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one  
    from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it  
    on a high and lofty mountain.  
On the mountain height of Israel  
    I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,  
    and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live;  
    in the shade of its branches will nest  
    winged creatures of every kind.  
All the trees of the field shall know  
    that I am the Lord.  
I bring low the high tree,  
    I make high the low tree;  
I dry up the green tree  
    and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the Lord have spoken;  
    I will accomplish it.

**Mark 4:26-34**

[Jesus] also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;

yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

## Sermon

The success of countless television programmes about the natural world suggests that seeds, plants and growth continue to fascinate us as much as they clearly did when Jesus used such images to describe the Kingdom of God. Which of us is not mesmerised by time-lapse photography, showing the growth and blossoming of plants? And what of the fascination with which we carefully sprinkle cress seeds on kitchen roll, keeping them watered, and watching them germinate and then grow. Or the first sunflower we planted – the excitement of how that small seed can become first a green shoot, and then a tall plant with a striking yellow flower. Even if we don't remember doing it ourselves, perhaps we have watched children and grandchildren watch in awe at the wonder of creation.

As a non-gardener, I have a particular affinity with this morning's gospel reading, a parable in which Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to seed scattered on the ground, which grows even without our intervention. There is something reassuring about remembering that God's Kingdom is not dependent on us for its growth. Equally encouraging is the sense that growth is in its very nature.

I was having a conversation with a friend the other day about her five year old son. She was explaining that he just can't get enough of learning new things. The world fascinates him, and he constantly wants to discover more. It's how children are. When I was teaching, there were occasions when we would have conversations about how we could motivate young people to want to learn. I found myself wondering whether we should in fact be looking at the situation from the opposite direction. Given that it is in the nature of people to want to learn, what is it about the school environment that gets in the way for some young people?

Perhaps part of the message of this morning's gospel reading is similar. Instead of asking ourselves how we can grow the Kingdom – what conditions we need to provide – we should instead be asking what has got in the way of something that grows so naturally.

And maybe part of the answer is in the second parable, comparing the Kingdom to a mustard seed. The specific point being made is about the minuteness of the seed comparative to the scale of the growth. Yet there is another point that would not have been missed by Jesus's audience. Mustard trees, which were really more like shrubs, were a pest. They were not attractive or statuesque, but rampant and visually unexceptional.

In our Old Testament reading, we hear a glorious description of cedar trees – they often make an appearance in the Psalms. If Jesus had wanted to give a majestic description of the Kingdom, he could have chosen to describe the cedar tree, as so many had done before him. But he didn't. Which makes me wonder why.

Despite my reluctance for gardening, I do have a close relationship with weeds. Now of course we all know that the definition of a weed is simply a plant that is in the wrong place. But we also all know what we're talking about when we describe weeds. Whenever I set about gardening, there is always a great deal to do, and over the years I have become fascinated by the sheer range and variety of weeds. There is one that is prevalent at this time of year that spreads extremely quickly. It has slightly sticky leaves, but its roots are very shallow. When I'm weeding, this is the type of weed that I like because I get maximum impact from my weeding for minimum effort. The sticky leaves pull away easily, and without deep roots, I can remove a great deal quite quickly.

There are other smaller weeds that grow as distinct plants. One in particular looks like a mini bush as it grows. It seeds rapidly, so appears throughout the garden, but it can usually be pulled up root and all. More frustrating are those weeds that produce quite a bit of ground cover, but are quite hard to uproot. I find myself tearing away at the leaves, yet knowing that with the root structure intact, they will soon reappear. Bindweed can be quite a satisfying plant – if you manage to uproot a whole length of it, it feels like progress. And perhaps you, like me, can't help but feel that the flower is really rather beautiful. Dandelions have such deep roots, that it takes real dedication to ensure that the entire root is removed. And you only need to watch the seeds take flight to realise why there are so many of them.

And then there are brambles. The Vicarage garden is full of brambles. They grow anywhere and everywhere. And then they root themselves from the fresh branches. I swear that in the warm, damp conditions of a British spring, if you sat for long enough in the garden, you would actually see them grow in real time. The roots of the larger plants go deep, and the thorns make pulling out the branches a painful and torturous experience. They latch on to all of the surrounding foliage, daring you to keep on pulling.

Yet we all know that, come the late summer, pretty white flowers will appear, and by autumn, there will be glorious blackberries.

When Jesus used the parable of the mustard seed, I wonder whether he wanted us to think about something like brambles when we think about the Kingdom of God. I wonder whether he wanted us to begin to get to grips with the fact that the Kingdom might not look exactly as we would think.

It's something that he taught in so many ways throughout his earthly ministry. When he reminded his disciples that they should not seek positions of status, but should rather be prepared to serve. When he mixed with those on the margins of society – the tax collectors and sinners; the voiceless; the poor and those without status. When he spoke about the last being first and the first being last. When he spoke of losing our lives in order to gain them.

If we think carefully about all that Jesus stood for, it is hardly surprising that the Kingdom might not look like a neatly manicured lawn with tidy borders – beautiful though those undoubtedly are. This morning's parables remind us of a number of things. That it is in the nature of the Kingdom to grow – that we are made to be drawn to God and all that is of God. That even if it begins small, the Kingdom will grow rampantly. And that it might not look quite as we expect. That there is space in the Kingdom for all sorts.

Perhaps this week we might take a little time to look in new places for signs of God's Kingdom. To recognise those signs where we might have least expected them. And to be a part of finding out where God is at work, and joining in.

Amen.