

Sermon preached at OCC, 23 June 2024

Gracious God, great Teacher, Bearer of peace, we seek your wisdom. Open our hearts and minds to your word and possibilities yet unseen. Amen.

Mark 4:26-34

A new seed of God's kingdom

Last Saturday, I attended a Children's ministry leadership conference, *Way2Go*, organized by Scripture Union New Zealand, with another children's ministry team member. The theme of the conference was *The Ripple Effect*, with the quote by Mother Theresa: "*I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples.*" We were given a paper bag with materials; among them were two small stones. Throughout the day, the stones became the symbols of our choices and actions that could stimulate others and create ripples that spread the whole pond or river. I attended three workshops, and among them, *Partnering with Parents* meant a lot to me as children and young families are the church's future. As I contemplated the parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed in Mark, the meaning of these two small stones became even more significant as a symbol of the infancy of our children's ministry here at OCC as a new seed in God's kingdom.

The gospel of Mark was written around the First Jewish War¹ towards the end of the reign of Emperor Nero,² in which the hope for God's in-breaking of the kingdom is strongly expressed.³ That is, the reign of God doesn't depend on linear human time or space, but it can manifest as God wills. When Mark wrote his gospel around 70 C.E., soon after the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, it was a turmoil period for the Jews in Jerusalem. For Romans, destroying the temple and burning the whole city was a sure way to trample down the hub of Jewish rebel resistance. For the Jews in Jerusalem, it became a major turning point to change their lives physically and spiritually. The siege of Jerusalem continued for five months. The Romans entirely enclosed the city with a wall and cut off supplies to the city completely to drive the Jews to starvation. By the time the Romans, led by the future emperor Titus, destroyed the city and the Second Jewish Temple, the whole city plunged into total despair. According to Josephus, a contemporary Jewish historian, the city was ravaged by murder, famine, and cannibalism, as nothing couldn't get in or get out during the siege. It was when this hopeful message for God's in-breaking kingdom was written through the form of parables.

¹ 66-70 C.E.

² 54-68 C.E.

³ Mark 13

In Mark 4, we read a series of seed parables, including the parable of the sower,⁴ the seed growing secretly,⁵ and the mustard seed.⁶ We can easily imagine what seeds would symbolize. Seeds are small and vulnerable but can sprout and grow even in tough times. Seeds are powerful, too, as they have a mission to produce the next generation. According to the *Guinness World Record*, the oldest seed germinated is a 2,000-year-old date palm seed recovered from excavations at Herod the Great's palace in Masada, Israel. It was germinated in 2005. Small but strong seeds are a good image of a mysterious reality, such as God's kingdom, whose growth occurs without our initiation or knowledge. A seed that sprouts today is new, too, no matter how long it has been stored.

In the parable of growing seed, we don't know the soil condition, and the sower doesn't seem to care too much about the seed either. As he sleeps and rises night and day, the seed germinates and grows secretly. As Mark's gospel was written in a time of high anxiety, we imagine that the parable of the growing seed could have given comfort and guidance to the endangered church. While the lamenting Jews over the destruction of the temple had to endure the difficult time of Roman brutality, the Christian Jews also had to endure the tough time even though their faith was not in the physical temple but in the living Christ. For them, keeping God's words faithfully, as the seed that could be planted to sprout for the future of the church, was the source of hope to live tomorrow.

In addition, the big tree image in the mustard seed parable tells us about metaphors for nations. Israel is especially portrayed as a noble cedar in Ezekiel ⁷ - "Under it, every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind..."⁸ These parables show us that in the kingdom of God, the growth of the kingdom is hidden and indirect and not easily perceived. But its manifestation would make all surprised. God never fails to deliver God's people as if a seed and all its DNA information will surely be handed down to the next generation. So, what does it tell us today?

At the *Way2Go* conference, we met many young people in their 20s or 30s who had been doing their children's ministries for many years. They were the experts, and they knew how to grow their ministries. The OCC children's ministry team was born just a few months ago, and there could be people who might wonder why not just join other big youth programs in other

⁴ Mark 4:3-8

⁵ Mark 4:26-29

⁶ Mark 4:30-32

⁷ Ezekiel 17:22-24

⁸ Ezekiel 17:23

churches as they may cater to your needs better than you do. But if the children's ministry is all about the relationship with our children in our parish area, which includes Birkdale, Beach Haven, and Northcote, not to mention Birkenhead, our responsibility is indeed vital. It can be compared to our desire to go to a local farmer's market where we know the growers and their fresh produce from their gardens or farms. It's all about relationships between the farmers and patrons, their garden produce, and our health, but we miss such relationships in a mega shopping mall/supermarket.

Today, we are having Luna Samuel's baptism, a beautiful event for the church that is similar to planting a new seed. The whole process of baptism can be compared to the seed's secret growing. It goes back to Marion Bradley – the great-grandmother of Luna, and the entire family's Christian upbringing. It involves the baptismal gown that Luna is wearing, which was brought from Canada by her uncle and pre-worn by Luna's cousins and family members. As if the whole village rolls up their sleeves to see this happen, the baptism has been planned out of a holy burden that Emma and Albert may have had since Luna was born. Like the seed would sprout and grow, and then the earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head, we don't know the whole secret process of this baptism. But today, God wants us to confirm that Luna belongs to God's family through whom the word of God will continually grow and spread as she grows. Although the present world is full of uncertainties, Jesus calls on us to have more patience with and respect for failure, hiddenness, and insignificance. They can point beyond themselves toward the reality of the kingdom of God already in our midst. Similar to these small stones that can create ripples in the pond, we plant a tiny seed of God patiently through the baptism of Luna through the OCC children's ministry, and it will prosper to be a large tree that will invite those who need rest and comfort so that they can be fully restored. We thank God for the gift of baptism and children and ask for blessings. Amen.