

I want you to use your imagination this morning.

Imagine that you are sitting in your place of work. You go in every day, you've built up really good relationships with your colleagues. Every morning you pray that God will open up opportunities to talk to your colleagues about Jesus, that they may come to know him as Lord. The years go by, but you don't see any fruit coming from your conversations. What is happening?

Or imagine You are a small church based in a community that generally are not attending church. Every Sunday you come together. You plan events to reach out to the community. Some people visit and stay. Many others come and go. You are praying and working like crazy to see your church grow, but no matter what you do, you seem to stay about the same size. What is happening?

Now you may wonder why I did that, well it's exactly what Jesus is describing in the parables this morning - the parable of the growing seed and the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus told us these parables in order to encourage us to keep on sharing his story even when we do not see results. We've got to recognize that the kingdom of God does not always grow the way we think it should grow. In fact the Kingdom of God really doesn't work the way we expect it to. So let's unpack these two parables, and understand what they tell us about God's kingdom and how God's kingdom grows.

I. The Parable of the Growing Seed (verses 26-29)

So let's look at the parable of the growing seed first. This isn't a particularly well known parable, because it's actually only described in Mark. But it's a parable about the Kingdom of God. What is the Kingdom of God – it's the reign of God. And so the easiest way I think of seeing what it looks like is to see how Jesus behaves in every situation and what he says – that's what the Kingdom of God is like.

So what do we learn from this parable? Well if we want to see God's kingdom grow, we must first plant seeds. Now that might seem like a very basic statement in terms of gardening, but if you leave out this step, no matter what else you do, you will never harvest a crop. We have been crazy busy this year with Alison's new job, and with doing church differently. And because of that there are not many flowers in our garden. It doesn't matter how many times I will water the pots, there's nothing beautiful that will appear, apart from weeds after time.

And that is what is required for the kingdom, It begins with planting seeds. If we are to see God's kingdom grow, we **must** share God's word with others, especially the good news of Jesus Christ as found in the gospel. No seeds, no plants, no growth. It is that simple.

As Churches begin to reopen again after COVID there are many that may find it hard to restart again, because over years they have relied upon a faithful few, but have not laid down any seeds in their community. Folks, we must be active in planting seeds in our communities.

Are you sharing God's word with other people? Because if you are not, you should not expect to see growth any more than I should expect to see beautiful flowers this year in my garden. If we want to see God's kingdom grow, we must plant the seeds.

The second thing about this first parable is that it is ultimately not up to us to make the seeds grow. That's God's job. We cannot see what is actually taking place behind the scenes, in the same way as we cannot see the germination process under the ground. So in peoples' lives I have learned to understand my place in cultivating their growth, but I also understand that I am not God. I get very frustrated at times when I don't see more progress in people's spiritual lives, but ultimately once I plant the seed it is up to the person and God.

Sometimes, even when you've planted the seeds, it may look for a time like nothing is happening. But that's only because you can't see what is going on beneath the soil. You need to give it time. You need to trust God to do his work. As long as you are planting seeds, then you can be confident that some of those seeds are going to grow. One day, perhaps when you least expect it, the plants will start poking their heads up through the ground, growing and maturing until the grain is finally ripe and ready for harvest. We must plant the seeds. God will make his kingdom grow.

So we plant seeds, we are patient in allowing God to do his work. And now to the parable of the mustard seed. If you have ever seen a mustard seed, they are so small. And yet they can grow to massive trees. Jesus here is making the point that his Kingdom appears to start small, even though our God is so big. Remember that a small group of followers were with Jesus and yet they were confronting the massive force of the Roman Empire.

But you see God doesn't seek out the brightest and the best, but he seeks out sinners who know they need a Saviour. Paul wrote to the church of the Corinthians:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

So here is Jesus born lowly in a cattle trough, born into poverty, brought up in simple surroundings, but like that small mustard seed his Kingdom will grow surprisingly large and strong. And that is so true today. The gospel may have started small but it has grown incredibly. If only the disciples could have seen the church today, how far the gospel has gone since those small beginnings 2,000 years ago!

As I reflect on our Compassion ministries that began long before I started here with handing out a hot cross bun to people on the streets on Good Friday, and to see where it has come to now – with Baby Basics, School uniforms and so the list goes on, it's incredible. That's the mustard seed effect. It's nothing big, nothing lavish, but it starts with real intention in planting seeds.

So the question today is this - have you seeds to start planting, or are you going to leave here, and in the week ahead not share the gospel with those you will be in contact with. The growth of the Kingdom depends on you and me to begin the process. Remember like any crop, it must be harvested, it is grown to be used, and not just admired. Let us be people who plant the seeds in Ballyclare and Ballynure and wait and pray as God brings these seeds to blossom. If we comment on not seeing any growth remember that it starts with ourselves.