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### **Growing God (Mark 4. 1-9, 26-34)**

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‘Listen!’, says Jesus. ‘A sower went out to sow’ (Mark 4.3), and so kicks off a sequence of three seed-based parables in Chapter 4 of Mark’s gospel.

In the first – the well-known parable of the sower – the emphasis seems to be on the condition of the ground in which the seed is sown, on the quality of receptivity. The word of God may be broadcast, but depending where it falls – on hard, rocky, thorny or fertile ground – it grows to produce fruit or it doesn’t. In the second parable, the key notion is that neither those who sow, nor those in whom the seed is sown can of themselves force it to grow. Trust, humility and patience are necessarily called for in the germination process, which remains essentially mysterious and beyond human control. For the kingdom of God, Jesus says, ‘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’. And in the third parable, the emphasis is, it seems, on the surprising disproportion or unexpectedness of the impact of this seed of the kingdom of God. For at the beginning, when it is first ‘sown upon the ground’, it is like a mustard seed, ‘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’.

The more time you spend with these parables, the deeper they become, the more nuance you find. I’ve been struck this week, for example, by the fact that the seeds Jesus speaks of are not all the same species. In the first two stories, the ‘seed’ is imagined by analogy with grain, which grows up, ripens to a ‘full head’, and can be harvested to provide food and more seeds; in the third parable, the seed grows into a large shrub which provides shade and habitation for creatures. In each case,

though, the import seems similar – the seed of the kingdom produces of itself for the nourishing and nurturing, the generation of more life.

Commentators suggest that these parables are best read in what you might call two ‘time zones’.<sup>1</sup> First came their initial telling by Jesus, remembered in the aural tradition of the early church; part of his tireless attempt to communicate by analogy what God’s life is like and the possibility of it taking root and manifesting in human lives. Then came the retelling of these stories in the context of Mark’s own community – which was small, probably persecuted, and presumably reassured to think that its smallness and the slowness of its mission were not signs of failure. For in these parables, they hear that their calling is simply to let God grow within them, and then to share the seed and hospitality of the kingdom as they can. How their growing, ripening and sowing might enable life to spring up around them and within others – well, that’s not necessarily up to them to determine. There are forces other than their efforts involved here, including the irrepressible fecundity of the seed itself.

Well, as with all the parables, there’s great depth of meaning in what appears simple. And I think there are fundamental insights here about how we might understand God at work in the world and in us – insights that are significant for the maturing of faith and prayer. It’s these I’d like to draw out a little further.

We’ve already seen that in these analogies, ‘Jesus speaks of the work of God in terms of natural processes’.<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams says this tells us something about how God characteristically acts – and it’s ‘not with thunderclaps; not with immensely dramatic and instantaneous interventions’. It’s true, Williams notes, that dramatic things may happen. But characteristically, as Jesus presents it, God acts from the ‘within’ of things, ‘subtly, slowly, from the very depth of being’. Sometimes the gospels report, and sometimes we ourselves may feel we have particular experiences where God’s presence or prompting seems more clearly evident than others – as if

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), p.57.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.41.

there has been an intervention from beyond. But Williams suggests, this is not because God has suddenly interrupted the finite order, but because particular configurations of the finite order have become more transparent to or available for God's steady, ever-presence.<sup>3</sup> This profoundly affects how we understand the work of prayer. It's not trying to get God to 'do' things, but becoming ourselves more receptive and responsive to God's will and grace.

If this is right, if God characteristically works from the 'within' of being, then two things follow. First, we should expect God to be discernible in the world, and in the patterns and possibilities of the world God has made. And this is what the parables point us to. They are 'Jesus' way of saying to the people listening: you know more than you realize about God, but the trouble is that you look and look, and you don't see, you listen and listen but you don't understand'.<sup>4</sup> 'The kingdom of God is as if ...', Jesus says; 'it is like this', it works like this – it shares itself, it wants to take root, to grow and fruit, to generate more and more life. Here it is among you. Do you not perceive it? Yet on the other hand, although Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is *like* aspects of the world's life and may be compared to them, it is not *reducible* to the world's life, not identical with it.

A sceptic might argue that if God is supposedly at work in the world largely from 'within', through the processes of the world ... then do we really need to invoke God at all? Why not just say: this is how the world works? What do we add to our understanding of life, how do we augment life's possibilities by bringing God into the picture?

This, I think, is where the genius of the seed analogy becomes clearer. Remember Jesus teaches that God communicates God's self to us, God's word comes to us, like a seed. And a seed needs to be sown if it's to become apparent what it is, what it means. 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground ... and the seed would sprout and grow'. The inference is that you cannot

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William.B. Eerdmans, 2007), p.269.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.41.

know God, you cannot perceive the reality and effect of God's ever-presence, unless God has begun to grow in you; or (to use a different agricultural metaphor from the gospels) unless you are beginning to be grafted onto God. There is no way of the reality of God being proved to you, from outside of relationship, or from any kind of a safe distance. The sceptic may ask, but how is it possible that this reality you call 'God' may take root in us? How does this happen? And the answer is, we never really know. But the sign that it *is* happening is growth, fruitfulness and generativity.

So with extraordinary economy, these parables communicate something of what God is like, how God characteristically acts – subtly, slowly, from the within of things. They teach that the 'life' of God may grow in ours and say something about the conditions for God, so to speak, taking root in us. And they speak of the impact of our receiving this seed, this life, offering it the hospitality of ours. Williams writes that Jesus is suggesting 'to his disciples the daring idea that the way God changes things will be from the heart of the human world, not by intervention from the sky'. God is transforming us and the state of things, healing the world's wounds, forgiving and liberating our failures and hurts, 'by being with and in the processes of the world', acting through the lives of those 'who have been called and commissioned by Jesus to be ... places where the work of God can start to blossom and expand in the world'.<sup>5</sup>

Listen again, then, to what he has to say: 'the kingdom of God 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'. The 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Gregory of Nyssa defined sin as 'the failure to grow'. Let us pray, then, for the growth of God in us.

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.43.