

17.06.2018
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Introduction

In a Gospel that is full of secrecy and hidden meaning, these two short parables from the Gospel of Mark do not disappoint. Our ability to move towards our inner-self and to see ourselves as we truly are before God, to allow God to work in our own lives as we find solace and rest in his presence, and to move back to the work to which we are called. The parables speak about the transformation that is possible in our relationships when we allow God to speak to us and when we respond to God's voice. In this way, a small act of listening and being in the presence of God can bring about a great act of transformation in our own lives, and in the relationships with whom we share a conflict.

Text

He 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.

Comment

Margaret Silf describes prayer as moving towards the 'I am' – a move towards the centre of myself – a move closer to the person I truly am before God. Silf describes that in this moment of being with God, a 'God Seed' is planted in our inner being. If we find the space and solitude to stop and listen to God, this God Seed grows.

In Mark's Gospel, the Parable of the Mustard Seed speaks of prayer. It is no coincidence that the word used by Jesus when speaking about birds of the air may have come from the Greek word 'orneon' – which signifies to perceive or to hear. A place to listen to God – to hear the voice of God.

The smallest of all seeds grows into a large shrub, where the birds of the air find shelter and rest. The shrub is far more than a place to rest and sleep. It is a place of refuge and solitude.

This shrub that Jesus speaks of is where we connect with our inner self in and through the presence of Christ.

It is a place of transformation that takes place when we take some time away from our work and ministry in the Kingdom of God, resting in the presence of God and listening to the voice of God.

The parable of the Mustard Seed is preceded by the parable of the Scattered Seed – and there is a link between these two stories. There is an urgency in the story of the Scattered Seed, where, once the grain is ripe, the farmer 'at once he goes in with his sickle'.

We see similar wording and urgency in the book of Joel, 'Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe'. The passage in Joel is about war and conflict. About the cutting down of the enemies of Judea and the coming of the day of the Lord. It is quite possible that Jesus was once again drawing on Old Testament scriptures as he told this story,

On the surface the parable of the Scattered Seed is about the miracle of God tending to a seed and nurturing it until it produces grain without human intervention. Yet the hidden meaning of this parable leans towards the urgency of moving towards conflict and the coming of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the mustard seed gives us some warning of moving towards and facing a difficult situation too quickly.

When we face a difficult situation, there is a need to be able to seek shelter and take time to reflect on the situation, before moving towards the conflict – to work out what is going on in our deepest being in order to be a fruitful presence within the difficult or challenging situation.

This is moving towards the 'I am' – a place of being in God's presence. A place of hearing the voice of God. A place where God is enabled to work with our own emotions and feelings – to both uphold and to challenge us. For it is when we go direct to a conflict, with no self-awareness, no inner processing, no allowing God to first work in our own lives, that we face the conflict not with the Spirit of God, but with the inner needs of our human being.

The importance of allowing time and space where we hear God's voice and rest in the presence of God is not to be underestimated. For this is where the real work in our own lives takes place – and when we allow the 'God Seed' to take root and be germinated, then a transformation can take place.

To be challenged, to be refreshed, to be truly ourselves before God requires a vulnerability on our own part, a willingness to look deep within ourselves. It is not a space to stay forever – it is a place to stay for a while, before moving back to the work we are called to in the Kingdom of God

As we move out from our place of solace, to our daily lives, and as the God Seed is germinated in our lives, so we are transformed, and as we interact with others, so our relationships may be transformed. And so in this small act of spending time in the presence of God, we are enabled to see great acts take place. We could say that God has not only touched us, but has somehow taken root in lived experiences. What a wonderful gift to receive.

Response

Where is your favourite place to sit?

Perhaps it is a chair in the house or garden, or maybe like me, in the outdoors – a rock by an old bridge where I watch the water from a stream flow underneath before it falls dramatically down a waterfall.

Is this the place that you sit in solace with God? Is this the place that you go to, to intentionally still your own voice and wait to hear the voice of God?

This week, make some time to go to your favourite place, or perhaps discover a new place to sit. When distractions come into your mind, put them to one side and find your inner-being. And when you are still, both in mind and body, wait for God to speak. Let the voice of God be a new seed, small as it is, that is planted in your life. And remember that the Mustard Seed grew into a large shrub – one that was transformational to the birds of the air.

Prayer

God of the small mustard seed

I thank and praise you

for the rest you provide when life is busy

for the shelter you provide when life is tough

for the promise of being able to spend time alone with you

God of the large shrub

I thank and praise you

for the seed you plant in my life

for the growth you promise in my life

for the transformation you bring

As I move towards you, as I rest in your presence, as I listen to your voice

Amen
