

THE SECRET SEED

Mark 4:26-29 [MW21-18]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 16 May 2021

J. Scott Armstrong, associate professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania conducted a test among university staff and professionals. As a result he came up with what he called the 'Dr. Fox Hypothesis'. An actor posed as Dr. Myron R. Fox and delivered a lecture of 'double talk', patching raw material from a Scientific American article into non sequiturs and contradictory statements interspersed with jokes and meaningless references to unrelated topics. The audience of professionals on anonymous questionnaires reported that they 'found the lecture clear and stimulating.' Go figure.

The there's a poster that used to be popular a few years ago

- it was only words, and the words said:
I'm not sure you realise that what you think you heard me say
is not exactly what I meant!

Parables, it seems to me, can be a bit like that

- they're supposed to make things clearer
yet often seem confusing
- Jesus is a whole lot like that in Mark's gospel:
confusing, at least for the disciples
- and Jesus' parables were supposed to help them understand ...

Parables though are more like "poems"

- parables attempt to convey a sense, a feeling, a perspective, an experience
in a way that a logical, straight forward description cannot
- kind of like the difference between a painting and a diagram

So I wouldn't expect someone to say: "Right, that's what it means"

- I would expect people to catch a glimpse of something
to have an "aha" moment
- and so it is with the parable that is today's gospel reading
this parable is pretty special too – do you know why?
it is the only parable Mark records that does not occur in another gospel
- this parable is unique to Mark

This unique parable gives us a unique insight into 'the kingdom of God'

- a unique insight into Jesus' ministry and the ministry of those who follow Jesus
it starts by saying "God's kingdom is like ..."
this parable promises to give us the inside running
the real deal on the kingdom of God
- great, except ... hang on, what exactly is this 'kingdom of God'?
any ideas???

William Barclay explains that the 'kingdom of God' really means 'the reign of God'

- it means the day when God's will will be done as perfectly on earth
as it is in heaven
- that is the goal of God for the whole universe

So, to the parable

- the farmer scatters seed, that's the farmer's job
the farmer scatters some seed in a field
- then he sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, doing something

But there is no mention of watering or weeding

- no mention of fertiliser or talking to the little plants and the seed, well the seed just keeps on growing while the farmer does ... nothing
- the farmer doesn't even have a clue how what's going on is going on! the farmer scatters the seed and then does absolutely nothing while the seeds grow ... all by themselves

There is a bit of a question as to just who 'the farmer' might be in this parable

- is the farmer God, sowing the seeds then reaping the harvest at the end of time?
- or is the farmer Jesus?
or the followers of Jesus?
us even?
- something to ponder ...

So what other gems does this little parable highlight for us?

- it seems to point out the passivity and the helplessness of human beings the farmer does not, indeed cannot, make the seed grow we cannot make God's kingdom come
- human beings can frustrate and hinder the coming of the kingdom but we cannot stop it
- similarly we can create the situation where it is given the opportunity to come more fully but we cannot make it happen
- ultimately it is up to God and God is the one who can and will make it happen
- this is indeed good news, because it means it's not up to us if it was up to us, we might muck it up big time but we can't, because God is in charge of the growing
- does that mean we do nothing, just have to sit back and wait? I don't think so!
our part is to ... scatter the seed!

The parable also tells us that this 'growth' may be imperceptible

- but there is always growth
if you watch a plant every day, you cannot see it growing
but if you see the plant, and then see it again after an interval
you can certainly notice the difference
- the parable gives us this message of encouragement:
even though you may not be able to see it, the kingdom of God is growing

The parable also tells us that this growth is constant

- night and day, even while we sleep, growth goes on
human effort and human goodness are often rather spasmodic
one day we take a step forward, the next two steps backward
- however there is nothing spasmodic about God
the work of God goes on quietly, unceasingly
- as the hymn says:
"God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year ..."

The parable reinforces the absolute certainty of growth

- the seed grows day and night
in spite of whatever else by be happening or not happening around it
- the growing establishment of the kingdom may go unnoticed
but it is certainly present
- beginning with the ministry of Jesus
right throughout subsequent history, to our very own day

This growth cannot be stopped and is inevitable

- a tree can split a concrete path with the power of its growth
even a weed can push its way through asphalt
- in spite of selfishness, injustice, greed, war and the like
God's work goes on
- we are assured that nothing in the end can frustrate the purposes of God

God's kingdom can be present like the seed prior to the appearance of ripe fruit

- its emergence is unnoticed by many
but they will have no difficulty recognising the ripe fruit
- there will be a consummation: there is a day when the harvest will come
this may be the harvest at the end of time
the day of judgement when the good fruit is separated from the weeds
- a warning of the suddenness of judgement
for no one knows the day or the hour
- it may also be understood as a word of consolation
for those who feel God is not acting decisively
- the kingdom has begun in Jesus' ministry
the kingdom is growing and nothing can get in the way of its growth

There are two things we can take from this

- first, we are to be patient
often we humans tend to think in terms of the moment
but God has all eternity in which to work
- second, we are to be a people of hope
in spite of what news coverage might show us of people's inhumanity
- in spite of those who feel there is more cause for despair than anything else
in the church as well as in the world
- we know God is in charge and that good things are growing

This parable of the seed growing quietly, by itself

- assures us of the certain harvest that results from near invisible beginnings
if that's not good news I don't know what is!!!
- keep going, don't allow yourself to get discouraged, don't give up
the time for harvesting is coming

Parables expert Pheme Perkins sums it up like this:

In the necessary, uncertain gap between sowing and harvesting all humans can do is wait. But the seeming lack of concern during that period is decisively and completely reversed at harvest time. Everyone must work as long and as hard as possible.

Usually at this point I like to include a story

- to kind of illustrate and round off
but I couldn't find one that as right
- then it struck me: this parable is for us!
this is Mangawhai Mission District's parable
- this is our parable

We are a smaller ministry unit, and though we have a big heart

- sometimes we struggle a bit
to which this parable says: don't worry, relax, enjoy
- our task is to scatter seed – all kinds of seed
some of this seed will grow, and some won't
- that's not our concern, that's up to God

We are to keep on scattering

- with our Sunday and Wednesday services
with Rhythm'n'Riggle, Bible Study, Coffee mornings, Welcome packs
and new projects like our calendar, Alpha
- and the ones that grow, the ones that take off
we are to be ready to carry on
- the ones that don't seem to go or grow we are not to worry about
just scatter some other kind of seed

I find this very encouraging, hopeful, empowering

- a parable for us, for each and everyone of us:
scatter the seed and go about our business
and at the same time keep an eye out, be on the lookout, for the growth
- be ready to roll up your sleeves for whatever harvest springs up!

From reflecting on all this over the past few days, this is where I get to

- God is in charge of growth and time
we are in charge of seed distribution
- the beginning, seed scattering, we can have some effect on
the harvest, when things are ripe and ready, then we'll have some work to do
- but the most important part, the middle, the 'growing', that's up to God
we can't rush it, we can't really influence it
but we can be ready!

So be conscious of scattering seed

- show kindness and care
keep up with what you are already doing
look for what else the Lord may be calling you to do
- continue meeting together Sunday by Sunday
pray
and then be ready to help with the harvest