

Homily for The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (19/07/20)

In today's Gospel Jesus puts three more parables before the crowd on the shore, to go with the parable of the sower that he set before them last week. St Matthew quite specifically says that Jesus puts these parables before the people. If you put something before someone, it sits there waiting for a response. Either the person picks it up, or they don't; some sort of active response is required. So Jesus puts these stories before the people to do with as they please. They can choose to ignore them, to let them lie there, or they can choose to take them up and examine them, mull them over, let them soak in, allow them to work away in their minds, seeing what sort of a reaction they spark off. The same thing happens with us – he still puts these parables before us and waits for us to respond as we will. How interesting to see what will happen.

The particular parable I suggest we chew over today is the short story of the mustard seed. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like: a mustard seed, which is tiny, but grows into a tree big enough for birds to find shelter in. Little by little, silently and imperceptibly, the seed becomes a seedling, then a plant, then a shrub and then a tree. Something remarkable has happened to bring about this change.

The seed is tiny and unimpressive to look at, so small it could be mistaken for just a piece of dust. Anyone who grows plants really cannot help being amazed at the way in which something tiny can grow into an enormous plant. Just water and sun, and some soil of course, and the transformation begins. Nothing is required of the seed except that it allows itself to be soaked in water and warmed by the sun; that is enough for it to grow and be fruitful. I think this story helps us to understand something really important; in exactly the same way, if we are to be fruitful, to live in a way that is lively and life-giving, the starting point for that is to allow ourselves to be saturated and warmed by the love of God. A fruitful life depends on this beginning: that we allow ourselves to be loved by God. He is the one who listens with great patience to all our anxieties and fears; he is the one who laughs gently at all our pride and arrogance; he is the one who sits up patiently with us through the long night of doubt, or despair, or grief; he is the one who stays close to us even when we forget him, or make decisions that are bound to lead to pain, or close us in on ourselves. Whenever life is at its hardest, the time is right to allow ourselves to be loved by him. Sometimes we push him away: we refuse to believe that we are lovable, or we are ashamed of ourselves, or we are too proud to admit that we need to be loved. But always the truth remains, that the beginning of a fruitful life is to allow ourselves to be loved by God.

It can be very tempting to think that we must always be busy, active, doing things. In these strange times, when the world has so many problems and we cannot quite see what the future holds it is tempting to plunge headlong into being busy, starting schemes and plans and projects. But no-one can shelter under a mustard seedling. The seed, the seedling, the plant, the bush must all soak up the rain and the sun, and only then can they become a tree where all can find shelter. Only the person who knows that they are small, and knows that they need first to soak up the warmth and moisture of God's love will one day grow strong enough to shade the needy, and piquant enough to set souls on fire. The beginning of fruitfulness is to allow ourselves to be loved by God.