

The kingdom is not a working bee

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (13 June 2021)

Readings: Ezekiel 17:22–24, Psalm 92:1–4, 11–14, Mark 4: 26–34

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You might have noticed that our Scripture readings this morning are bursting—one might even say fertile—with botanical imagery, with succulent buds and swaying palms, mighty cedars full of birds, diligent gardeners and tiny mustard seeds.

This subject matter is slightly fraught for me, since I'm neither an experienced nor a particularly talented gardener, despite coming from a long line of green thumbs. My grandmother, mother and younger sister have all, over the years, nurtured beautiful and bountiful gardens. Gardens that have fed me, body and soul.

The home I grew up in, for instance, was always fragrant with the smell of cut flowers, and on summer evenings, I'd be sent to pick tomatoes or zucchini or basil for the evening meal. And when I had children of my own, I found I wanted them to share these experiences, to know where their food came from, to spend their days in the fresh air, close to the earth and in the company of slaters, millipedes and earthworms.

So for years, despite our horticultural ineptitude, Jon and I discussed the garden that we would like to create in our backyard in Footscray. We read books and dreamt aloud, visited open gardens and made our plans. But nothing much ever seemed to get done.

It wasn't just the demands of work and study, of house renovations and family life that were stalling us; we were almost paralysed by our inexperience and our fear of failure. Every now and then, out of sheer frustration, I'd rush off to buy several potted plants in full flower, which I'd plonk on the veranda or in a corner of the yard. There they would languish, neglected and unloved, until inevitably they shrivelled or were choked by weeds, inspiring in me a renewed sense of guilt and incompetence. So six years after we'd bought our home, the yard remained much as it was when we first moved in: an expanse of tough old kikuyu, some ugly concrete paths and a Hill's hoist.

But then one day, realising that we needed help getting started, we invited our families to a working bee, and our yard suddenly became a hive of activity. Grass was dug up and

removed; raised garden beds and a sandpit constructed; gravel pathways laid and levelled; manure and compost dug through the soil, and the fences painted. Impatient as ever, I was keen to get the vegie gardens planted too. But my sister-in-law, another green thumb, recommended that we wait a couple of weeks to let the soil settle and the manure break down.

As the sun went down, and the final barrowload of sand was tipped into the sandpit, we were struck by the transformation. With a little planning, some borrowed tools, the generosity and cooperation of our family, and through sheer hard work, our yard had been transformed, 'Backyard Blitz' style. It was tidier, more orderly and attractive, even a little stylish. We were very pleased with the result, and deeply grateful for the skill and effort that had made it possible.

But in the weeks that followed, as I looked out over the empty garden beds and neat pathways and waited for the soil to be ready, I was aware that this was still a long way from being the abundant, verdant, even slightly wild garden I'd been dreaming of, a garden groaning with fruit and teeming with insects and birdlife.

Because, in the end, that kind of garden can't be created by a working bee. It can't be constructed. It needs to be planted and allowed to grow into something bigger, something unconstrained by plans or expectations. It needs faith and patience and hope, just as much as it needs water, fertiliser and sunshine. The planting of a seed is a kind of relinquishing. No matter how much we might want to rush things along and to force the garden to appear, ultimately we must stand back and allow the hidden seed to grow in its own time and in its own way. Like the farmer in the parable, we neither make the seed grow nor completely understand how it happens. We can only submit to the mystery. As the writer and gardener Terry Hershey observes, 'Gardening is ... the difference between managing life and entering into life'.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a grain planted in the soil; he tells us that it is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large shrub and attracts all kinds of birdlife. *He does not, you will notice, tell us that the kingdom is like a working bee.*

Presumably the farmer in the parable has worked hard to cultivate the soil, to weed and water and nurture his crop. But these are not the aspects of the process that Jesus chooses

to emphasise. Certainly we are called to throw ourselves, wholeheartedly, into the task of preparing for and nurturing the kingdom. A working bee can be a good and necessary thing. But it can also distract us; it can fool us into thinking that we are the ones responsible for making things happen; that we are the ones bringing in the kingdom. We can be misled into thinking that surface appearances are more important than deeper truths, and that worldly acceptance is a higher priority than real fruitfulness.

The kingdom of God is not a working bee. In the church, we can become so preoccupied by overarching theologies or our quest for relevance that we neglect the small, seemingly ordinary details, those tiny seeds that, when attended to and nourished, can grow mysteriously within us into the word of God. As Mother Teresa provocatively said, 'There are no great things, only small things done with great love.' As we occupy ourselves with strategies, infrastructure and grand plans, and as we congratulate ourselves on the success of various ministries (or, indeed, as we despair over their failure), we can lose sight of the fact that the kingdom of God is a gift to be received, not a task to be performed. It is a vast and magnificent reality that begins in smallness and humility.

The kingdom of God is not a working bee, and nor, it turns out, is the reading of a parable. Parables are by their nature a little bit mysterious; they are open and dynamic, susceptible to multiple and shifting readings. We want to rein them in, reduce them to mere allegories or equations, where A equals one thing and B another. But despite all our attempts to render them comprehensible, parables stubbornly resist systematic analysis. Like good poetry or music, they are open and porous, allowing the Spirit of God to cascade through them, speaking different words into different hearts at different times and places.

The Jewish audience to whom these parables were originally addressed were busy with their own kind of working bee, formulating grand plans and strategies for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. The promised kingdom of God was, for many of them, a vision of political glory that could be hastened by their own religious zeal or by revolution. The Messiah of their imagination was a figure of impressive stature and political power. Jesus, a humble Galilean carpenter, was hardly the saviour they were expecting. By emphasising the hiddenness of the kingdom in the first parable and the smallness of its origins in the second, Jesus alludes, at one level, to the obscurity of his own ministry as an itinerant preacher in the back blocks of Galilee.

Seed imagery is commonly used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the remnant of Israel, and the final kingdom is represented in both Daniel and our passage from Ezekiel this morning as a great life-giving tree, providing the nations of the world with shelter and nourishment. In contrast, Jesus' Jewish audience might have found his reference to a mustard seed a little unsettling, even subversive. The mustard plant, while certainly vigorous in its growth, is not a majestic tree like an oak or a cedar; it's just a large and unwieldy shrub, a weed even, regarded to this day by farmers in Palestine as a bit of a nuisance. It is welcomed, however, in Jesus' parable by the birds that find shelter in its branches. Jesus is challenging his audience to let go of their presuppositions. The kingdom of God is not what they think it is. It is certainly not what they, or we, would have planned.

The reign of God has come to us in the surprising person of Jesus, in his life and ministry, and through his death and resurrection. As we were reminded at Easter, we are, through the cross, forgiven and reconciled. Yet in many ways, nothing seems to have changed. The world is still beset by sin and suffering; our lives are as messy and stumbling as ever. We still seem to be looking out on bare, barren earth. In faith, we declare that the kingdom seed has been planted, but it's hidden and we struggle to see evidence of its growth or to believe in the fruitful and abundant life that awaits us. We live on the threshold between a kingdom that is present but not fully realised and the kingdom that is to come.

Sometimes it feels like the waiting will never end, but as Jesus reminds us, the moment of ripening and harvest comes suddenly. We cannot schedule a harvest or hasten its arrival; it occurs only when the crop is ripe and ready, at an hour appointed by God alone.

Commemorating the life of murdered Salvadoran Bishop Oscar Romero, his fellow Catholic bishop Ken Untener observed that

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us ...

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development ... We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It

may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results ... We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

A couple of weeks after our Footscray working bee, on a quiet weekday afternoon, I knelt on the ground and planted out our first crop of lettuces, sugar snap peas and broad beans. As I pushed the seeds into the soil, I was struck by their smallness, and by how vulnerable and uncertain the whole enterprise seemed. I thought about being a mother, a wife, a writer, a disciple. I was acutely aware of my shortcomings as a gardener, of my past failures and lack of expertise, so there was something both frightening and comforting in the act of pushing the seeds beneath the soil and leaving them there to grow. It was an act of letting go, an act of trust, an act of faith.