

Homily: 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

There's a story of a young man in Russia who had become a conscientious objector to war. Brought before the court, he explained that he believed in the law laid down by Jesus in the Gospel: that he must love his enemies, turn the other cheek, repay evil with good. The judge replied: "Yes, I understand that this is your faith, but you must be realistic. These are the laws of the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom has not come yet." The young man responded: "Sir, it may not have come for you, for Russia or for the world. But it has come for me, and I cannot go on killing and hating as though it had not come."

This young man understood something important: that for those who live in the Kingdom of God, life is different, and the laws which govern our lives must be different to the normal ways of human interaction. He also understood something else: that whilst it's true that the Kingdom has not yet come in all its fulness, it is already present on earth, in us, in the Church, and wherever Christ is to be found. Wherever God reigns, the Kingdom of God is present. If He reigns in our hearts, the Kingdom is here. So when we pray "Thy Kingdom come", we look forward to that time when, finally, everything will be subject to God's law of love, but we also pray for a deepening of the reign of God in our own hearts.

Jesus in today's Gospel compares the Kingdom of God to a small seed, using two parables. In the first, He teaches that a seed grows of its own accord: the farmer cannot make it grow, nor can he understand how it grows. He can only provide the right conditions in which it may grow. The rest is gift. So it is with the reign of God, both in our world and in our hearts. We cannot make it happen: it is His gift. But we can provide the right conditions in which the seeds of the Kingdom, the grace implanted within us, can grow into what it is meant to be.

Probably Jesus' original listeners would have been taken aback by His teaching. They certainly expected a renewal of God's reign, but no doubt expected that this reign would come from military power and political upheaval. The image of a mighty army would have met their expectations, not the image of God's reign being a tiny seed which takes time to grow. But we know this to be true: the real reign of God starts in very small ways and grows, within us and our world. The small seeds of faith planted in my heart by my parents, the unseen grace implanted in me at my baptism: these are the tiny beginnings of God's Kingdom in me. There is still a lot of growth which must happen! And in the world, too, the reign of God began in the smallest possible way: the conception of a child at the word of Mary, the humble virgin of Nazareth, an unknown girl in an unimportant village. Nothing could have been more hidden, yet nothing has had a more profound effect on our world than the Kingdom which grew from this young woman's yes to God.

In the second image, our Lord tells us that the tiny mustard seed grows into a great shrub, so large that the birds of the air can shelter in its branches. The Kingdom does not grow only for itself: it grows to provide for others. The reign of God in our hearts and in the Church enables us to become people who can give more generously. The more the seeds of grace grow within us, the more we can provide shelter to others. And not just to those we

love. It occurs to me that birds quite like to eat seeds: given the chance, birds may have eaten that tiny mustard seed before it had chance to grow. Yet now they nestle in the shade of its tree. The Kingdom of God teaches us to love and provide for those who would prevent the seeds of grace growing within us. We love our enemies and pray for those who oppose our faith.

We recognise in these images an important truth: that the Kingdom of God grows within us, but – like all growth – it is often slow, even imperceptible. So we need patience in our spiritual lives, and we need, as St Paul teaches today, to walk by faith rather than by sight, trusting that the Lord is giving us growth even when it's not obvious to us. But there's another point that our Lord is making in this parable. Think of how different a seed is from a large bush. Unrecognisable! If we knew nothing of the natural world, it would be impossible to believe that a bush could come from something so tiny. The Lord is teaching us that, if we accept His Kingdom, what is possible in us is so much greater than we imagine. The tiniest seeds of faith can produce wonderful things, if only we allow God to reign.

Fr Andrew

