

God's Work in seeds

KATHLEEN RUSHTON interprets two parables in Mark 4:26-34 — the seed that grows by itself and the mustard seed.

The ministry of Jesus in Galilee (Mk 1:14-8:30) divides into three sections. Each ends with people making a decision about Jesus and the *basileia* (reign) of God. In the first section (Mk 1:14-3:6), scribes question why Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:16). Pharisees question why he is not fasting (Mk 2:18), why his disciples are plucking grain on the Sabbath (Mk 2:24) and keep watching to see if he cures on the Sabbath (Mk 3:2). Their decision is to conspire with the Herodians to destroy him (Mk 3:6). The next section (Mk 3:7-6:6a), which is the focus of this reflection, is about Jesus and his new family who hear the word of God, accept it (Mk 4:20) and decide to follow him (Mk 6:6). The third section focuses on the disciples (Mk 6:6b-8:30) and ends with Peter declaring: "You are the Messiah" (Mk 8:29).

"Galilee of the Gentiles"

The two agricultural parables appeal to the hearers' experience of everyday life and their wider context. Jesus's hearers are the ordinary folk of Galilee. Matthew refers to "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Mt 4:15). This phrase indicates that Galilee, which is comprised of Zebulun and Naphtali, land God gave to the people (Deut 34:1-4), had for generations been conquered, invaded and was currently under the Empire of Rome.

Galilee was ruled by Antipas (4BCE-39CE), son of Herod the Great and also called Herod. He was raised in Rome and later the Emperor (*basileus*) bestowed on him the title of tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Greek culture had spread across the region. One of Jesus's disciples, Philip, had a Greek name. Cities were renamed with Greek or Roman names. Antipas supported the building of the new cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias in Galilee. The Herodians, who are associated with the Pharisees (Mk 3:6; 12:13), were local elites who supported the Herodian rulers in their general policy of government and in the social customs they introduced from the Empire (*basileia*) of Rome. Although opposed politically to the Pharisees, they participated with them in the persecution of Jesus.

The changing nature of social, ecological and economic life under Herodian rule and its Roman overlord affected Galilean peasant farmers and villagers greatly. This mix of imperial and political factors meant the resources of the



land were not shared equally by all who lived in the region as was intended in the ideals laid out in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. In the ancient Mediterranean world the landscape usually provided the key to the religious concerns of the locals. So the parables of Jesus come from a religious imagination earthed in the world of nature and the human struggle with it, while at the same time being grounded deeply in the religious traditions of Israel.

The New Family of Jesus

A series of parables and sayings (Mk 4:1-34) are addressed to the new family of Jesus. Their responses had contrasted with those of the elites as Jesus travels the Galilean countryside and waterfront. Not the rich and powerful but fishers, a healed man, the mother-in-law of Peter, a leper, a man who was paralysed, Levi, the twelve and those affected by the powerful, comprise the new family

17 June:

RL: Eleventh Sunday Ordinary Time Mark 4:26-34

RCL: Fourth Sunday after Pentecost Mark 4:26-34



of God: “Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brothers and sisters” (Mk 3:35). God as creator informs Jesus’s use of biblical tradition. Israel’s God as the creator could be trusted to make all things right in the present as God did in the Psalms and prophets.

The parables of the seed that grows by itself (Mk 4:26-9) and the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32) draw on the experience of farmers growing food. Grain – wheat and barley – were basic foods. Mustard seeds were used for seasoning or in healing remedies. The leaves were eaten raw or cooked. Yet do these parables tell of farmers’ experience? There is no inclusion of the hardships of preparing the earth – ploughing, harrowing, arid earth, tending, weeding, protecting from insects and disease. Absent, too, is mention of the toil for landlords, struggles of tenant farmers, taxes, debt, enslavement and dispossession.

The Care of God as of Old

Those who heard the first parable (found only in Mark’s Gospel) are not pressed to act (Mk 4:26-29). Actions of sowing and reaping are recorded. The emphasis, however, is on the people of the land’s reverent wait. These people walking through or alongside a ploughed field saw the plants and the potential food as God’s creative work. This connection was on their lips and in their hearts for praise of God and creation are at the core of the Psalms and Jewish prayer. The plants and the processes of Earth are agents revealing God’s mercy. Both parables extend that awe-filled, interconnected way of seeing all that is, as belonging, to the reign (*basileia*) of God.

The main character is not the sower or reaper but the seed which ripens despite all the forces stacked against it. Central to this parable is the wonder of creation. In the mysterious, benign earth is found the care of God as of old. The reign of God is about the person of God, not a place.

The farmer who had scattered the seed on the earth (Mk 4:26) goes about his ordinary life “night and day” in the Jewish rhythm of time where sunset is the beginning of the new day (Mk 4:27). He does not understand how the seed grows. The Earth produces growth “of itself” (*automatē*) without visible cause (Mk 4:28). The energy of the seed is unexplained. The focus is the working of the natural processes of Earth which transform the seed.

This parable directs the reader to the wonder of seeing the work of God and the Earth with new eyes. While other parts of the Gospel stress the hardships of life on the land, this parable creates peace and composure for weary people living under foreign occupation because it shows what happens when God is totally in charge of life and right relations exist. Through the agency of the seed, readers discover that so, too, the *basileia* of God develops at God’s initiative and its growth is unexplained and unseen.

In the second parable, too, there is no mention of a human agent. A mustard seed, the main character, is sown (Mk 4:32). The end is in the beginning; the great in the small; the present is in motion – though its development is hidden and insignificant. It grows “into the greatest shrub of all and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in shade” (Mk 4:32). This mysterious saying was well-known (cf. Ps 104:12; Ezekiel 17:23). The image of the world tree in whose branches birds find shelter, was widely used as an imperial symbol of the empire (*basileia*). Is Mark’s shrub suggesting a different quality for God’s cosmic empire (*basileia*)?

How can we reflect on these parables today, to understand where the seed of the care of God as of old is growing – though it grows unseen and hidden? Might we have to choose, too, between the *basileia* of Rome – the conquest and occupation of peoples – and the *basileia* of God? 

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