

# The Earth Produces of Itself

a sermon preached on the

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday 14 June 2009

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Ezekiel 17:22-24, Psalm 92:1-4,12-15, Mark 4:26-34

In the wisdom of the liturgical calendar we come now to that long period we call the 'Sundays after Pentecost', that five-and-a bit months of the year when we dress the church in green and read our way steadily through Marks' gospel. (Actually, in this Year B the lectionary also gives a five-Sunday mid-winter sojourn in John's gospel, and the way will be peppered with the occasional feast as well.) We say this is the time for steady growth in discipleship and in the mission of the church. So just when we might have thought that cranking ourselves up into a frenzy of discipleship action might be indicated, this morning we hear Jesus say: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself..."<sup>1</sup>

This cannot be right! The logic of our world is that *we* make things happen. The exception to this rule is when we find that we can't make happen the things *we* want to happen, and on such occasions we appeal to a deity to intervene and break the laws of physics and nature in order to satisfy our particular needs - I hardly need point out this is not Christian faith, but voodoo. Yet we are so accustomed to thinking that we have to make things happen, that we must work hard, that we must believe in this project and that, that it is by our dedication and persistence and commitment and positive mental attitude that things are accomplished. And there are enough instances in life to 'prove' that this is so. And bookshops are awash with 'How to...' manuals. And self-made millionaires demonstrate the 'power of positive thinking'. God, we declare, loves those who help themselves.

Against this backdrop, the Christ begins to teach the church in parables: "He began to teach them many things in parables... Let anyone with ears to hear listen! ... With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?... With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables."<sup>2</sup> And his parables have confounded Christians ever since, for they refuse to be tamed by the flat-earth moral lesson which we attempt to impose upon them. The hallmark of Jesus' teaching is the parable, and the hallmark of the parable is that they confound us, for we only understand the parables according to our ability to hear them. The antidote to conventional wisdom, it would seem, is the parable. For only the parable has the capacity to open our ears to what we cannot hear, to open our eyes to what we cannot see, to plant compassion in the barren and hardened-ground fields of our hearts.

And the parable itself is seed scattered in the earth, unseen, hidden, deep down, in our instinctual life, in the ground of our being. And we sleep and rise night and day, and this seed sprouts and grows, and we do not know how this happens. We do not know how this happens! "The earth produces *of itself*." We can interrogate the parables all we like at the level of rational intellect, and we might even extract some light and truth. But the One who scatters their seeds has scattered them in the invisible ground of our hearts, where something happens which we cannot see, or control, or organise, or make more efficient or productive. We do not know how it happens! That is what the kingdom of God is like – it is that which is planted in the earth of our being, creating richly, and we remain ignorant about its ways!

This is the only antidote to our works righteousness culture, our unshakeable belief that everything is accomplished by our doing it, albeit with God's assistance and blessing. Notice how the parable refuses to

<sup>1</sup> Mark 4:26-27, 28a

<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:1a, 9, 23, 33-34

allow us even our usual theological chicanery – God does not come to the assistance of what *we* set out to accomplish! No. The seed is scattered deep down, in the ground, and something grows which we did not create or cannot control.

Of course we don't like it when we are not in control, when we think we have a much better plan. So immediately Jesus tells another parable: "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."<sup>3</sup> The parable itself seems inconsequential, innocuous, irrelevant, certainly in terms of the great agendas and beliefs and concerns of the world. But this seed which seems so inconsequential becomes the greatest of all shrubs. And we do not know how all this happens! The seed which is scattered deep down in the ground of our being, which we did not create and cannot control, this is far superior to whatever plan we had determined ourselves to arrange and organise.

Now the especially work-ethic-focussed of us will rightly rise up against such a teaching, arguing that this is the slippery slope to laziness and lack of productivity. But notice that today's first parable is quite explicit about our responsibility: "When the grain is ripe, at once the person goes in with their sickle, because the harvest has come."<sup>4</sup> So our labour *is* required, without doubt. Our labour is to be ready to harvest that which has been growing, out of sight, at first, mysteriously producing, deep in the ground of our being. Clearly, to neglect to harvest that which the earth has produced of itself would be sin, in the sense that it is the refusal to cooperate with the Creator Ground of all Being. But failure to make the distinction between what *is* my responsibility and what *is not* is the high road to disaster. I do not create the growth. Another produces the grain, mysteriously and out of my sight and control, deep in the earth. My responsibility to act, 'to sickle', lies in bringing in the harvest of the crop which Another has provided. This is a subtle yet critical distinction! Little wonder Jesus teaches in parables!

And the greatest parable of all is the Eucharist. The seed which Christ's life, death and resurrection planted is the Eucharistic Body and Blood. There is nothing I can do to create this seed, nor its growth. It's growth is hidden, mysterious, in the earth, in the depths. Day by day we sleep and rise and break the bread, and all the while the seed is growing, and we do not know how! We do not know how the Eucharist comes into existence, nor how it 'works'. What *we* do when we make Eucharist together does not look grand or spectacular. Nevertheless the sacramental earth produces of itself. The astonishing harvest is precisely this – that we become what we have eaten! What we have eaten appears to us to be a tiny, inconsequential thing, a mere irrelevance to the world. Yet that which we have eaten grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs – the Body of Christ!

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 4:30-32

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