

# The Great Calm

a sermon preached on the

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday 21 June 2009

at

## St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Job 38:1-11, Psalm 107:1-3,23-32, Mark 4:35-41

The parable, as we noted last week, was the hallmark of Jesus' teaching, and the hallmark of the parables is that they defy our attempts to extract a singular, and usually moralistic, meaning out of them. Most of chapter four is taken up with the parable of the sower, and, as we heard last Sunday, the parable of the scattered seed and of the mustard seed. "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, and he does not know how. The earth produces of itself."<sup>1</sup> "The kingdom of God... is like mustard seed... the smallest of all the seeds... yet becomes the greatest of all shrubs."<sup>2</sup> "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>3</sup> And of course they fail to understand.

So in these concluding verses of chapter four he shows them - he *acts out* the parables' secrets. "Let us go across to the other side."<sup>4</sup> The 'other side' is that necessary encounter with the teaching of the parables that is not merely an idea, in the head. We can argue all we like out of rational intellect, but we only come to understand the kingdom of God as an *experience of the crossing to other side*, the crossing of the sea. What has to be crossed, in order to understand the kingdom of God, is the watery chaos, the depths. Here is a key to the parable's declaration that the "earth ... produces of itself"<sup>5</sup> - the unseen, the hidden, the depths, that domain where human intellect and reason must be servant to a greater truth.

And as then, Jesus takes only a few into the sea, just a few boats,<sup>6</sup> most of the crowd remains on the apparent safety of the land. Only some, at this stage, are taken into the depths - which they inevitably experience as terrifying, for humankind has always found it so: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"<sup>7</sup> The great wind storm on the sea recalls us to the fact that out of watery depths, the dark and abyssal chaos, the whole of creation was fashioned, according to the ancient Hebrew insight. All religious teaching remains sterile, and potentially dangerous and oppressive, except by encounter with the great windstorm which blows across the depths. This is the 'earth which produces of itself', revealing its own eternal truths, producing its great fruitfulness - and we do not know how!<sup>8</sup> We only know that the experience terrifies us, and that the teacher seems to pay little regard to our plight: "He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion."<sup>9</sup> Do you not care?

So here is the astonishing thing - there is no way of speaking about the kingdom of God which does not involve parables, and yet we do not understand parables because we expect to solve and tame them in our heads and force a single meaning upon them, and so the parables can only be understood by being enfleshed. Jesus puts flesh on what he has told them about the kingdom of God in metaphors of sower, scattered seed

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1 Mark 4:26-27  
2 Mark 4:31-32  
3 Mark 4:33-34  
4 Mark 4:36  
5 Mark 4:28a  
6 mark 4:36b  
7 Mark 4:38b  
8 Mark 4:27b  
9 Mark 4:38a

and mustard seed. The seed scattered on the ground, in order to bear crop, must undergo transformation – this is a non-negotiable fact of the nature of the creation. There is simply no yield apart from this transformation. A perfect seed in a display case is of no value whatsoever. Only a seed which, to borrow from John the evangelist, has fallen into the ground and dies <sup>10</sup> can bear rich fruit. On the lake Jesus begins to embody what he will ultimately have to en flesh to completion – the death of the seed of his own body and burial in the ground. “Asleep on the cushion in the stern” foreshadows his being laid to rest in cloths in the tomb. <sup>11</sup> Just as “Do this, to remember me,” foreshadows our being laid to rest in cloths in the tomb, that death might be overcome in we who share in the Eucharistic Body of Christ, and that we might rise.

And of course this reality of the earth producing of itself, the great windstorm on the watery chaos of our lives, inevitably prompts in us great fear, the fear of cowardice and timidity and despair. For at such moments we experience the kingdom of God as something utterly beyond our control, and which feels like it will annihilate us. And all we can manage, sometimes for years on end, is to sleep and rise night and day, <sup>12</sup> to do no more than what needs to be done, day by day in a cloud of unknowing and with a sense of powerlessness. The bread of our lives is broken open and we submit to the cup of suffering, week-by-week, and we do not know how it produces life in us. Yet Jesus tells us in the parable that the seed would sprout and grow, the earth producing of itself. And Jesus demonstrates this reality by taking us into the watery chaos which terrifies us, and, like the seed in the ground, apparently leaving us to the devices of chaos.

Then, just in the nick of time, when on the very brink of despair, when we had all but given up hope, and when, perhaps, we may have endured what feels like all night, which might in fact be many years of watery chaos... just in the nick of time the terrifying abyss is calmed under the influence of the One who breathed across the waters at the beginning, the One who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... in whom all things on earth were created. <sup>13</sup> Breathing again over the waters, “Be still, be calmed!” <sup>14</sup> the seed of awareness and life and freedom from fear sprouts. The earth produces of itself!

A great calm prevails! Growth, true growth, is the gift to us from out of the watery chaos which is our deepest reality, our abyss, our inner self. We think that we can extract growth and life and freedom by our clever devices, by our commitment to ideas and ideals and hard work. Yet only by entering into the watery abyss of being do we encounter the source of life, the earth which produces of itself. The great wind grips us with great fear, yet, under the influence of the kingdom of God, which is hidden in the earth and in the watery abyss, we come to experience the great calm. And not surprisingly, we are filled with great awe!

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<sup>10</sup> John 12:24  
<sup>11</sup> Mark 15:46  
<sup>12</sup> Mark 4:27a  
<sup>13</sup> Colossians 1:15-16  
<sup>14</sup> Mark 4:39b