

“Beneath the surface” a sermon based on Mark 4:26-34 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 17 June 2018.

The realm of God - all of creation, of heaven and earth as God intends it to be - creation flourishing, humankind living respectfully, love abounding, justice ruling, compassion everywhere - a new world.

The promise of a world remade - the reign of God - against the way of that time. The cruel violence and exploitation of the Roman Empire. Jesus calls from the Empire of Rome to the Empire of God.

From swords to ploughshares, from exclusion to hospitality, from punishment to forgiveness, from entrenched power to shared power – a very different world.

And they look at themselves: a small motley group of wondering people. A small and fragile community of disciples, learners, followers with a vague idea something is happening but not sure what. People pressed down by a great power called to be part of a different realm.

How is that possible?

So Jesus tells stories about seeds.

Seeds - small, insignificant, hidden, apparently ineffective, yet full of life that keeps pressing out. Even when we sleep, even when we are not doing anything ourselves, even when we cannot see it. Our action - sowing the seed, then letting the seed and the earth do its work. Jesus invites us to imagine that out of sight, beyond our effort, the seed of God's realm is growing.

That God is influencing people. Such imagination undermines two temptations.

The first temptation imagines we make the realm of God or build the realm of God or effect the realm of God or cause the realm of God to come.

So we force peace through taking up arms.

We force God's way through impatient intervention.

We try to do God's work through taking control.

That forces life to appear as we imagine it should appear.

That forces justice to come as we envisage it with our limited sight.

Which leads to harmful outcomes. Invade Iraq. Take children away from supposedly uncaring parents. Idolise strong leaders. Elect authoritarian governments. Desire people who cut through the process. Appoint people who force change. Intervene. Bully. Demand. Such actions arise from a violent spirit.

A Pakeha temptation. We can make of this country what we want. We can climb the mountain. We can fix things. All we need is number eight wire. Take control.

And we raise up the singular achiever, individual effort, the pioneer.

The second temptation is to give in and focus only on what we ourselves can control.

“I cannot control any of these big issues, so I will focus on what I can control – the bathroom renovations, the school my children go to, the little bit of life I can live.”

Both temptations focus on the idea that I control what happens, that things happen because I make them happen, that I cause life to flourish.

By contrast, Jesus keeps before us this broad horizon, the encompassing realm of God on the one hand, that questions our human visions that tests our easy answers.

Jesus keeps before us the life of God at work in our world beyond control, beyond sight, beneath the surface, often in less obvious places.

That life in which we are invited to share.

The seed that grows while we sleep.

Many years ago, as part of a study, each week I gathered three people and asked what happened to them during the previous Sunday’s sermon. They talked for an hour about the connections they made, the feelings awakened, the actions they took, the questions they had. I had no idea so much went on beneath the surface.

That hidden work is the realm of prayer in which the spirit works.

When we don’t know what is really needed and we don’t understand what is going on.

Paul says to the church at Rome, in the paraphrase by Eugene Petersen– “If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. God does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.”

Deeper than what we see.

Jesus says the seed becomes a weed that spreads and grows to be a shrub.

Taking up an example from Ezekiel. Ezekiel's description of the empire of Egypt is of a tree, a tree that towers above all the trees of the forest; its bows grew large and its branches long. All the birds of the air made their nests in its bows.

Ezekiel is being satirical. He is announcing that Egypt has got too big for its boots. He goes says that Yahweh, God, will cause this empire of Egypt to be cut down and the birds of the air will rest on its ruins, not in its branches.

Jesus stands in the tradition of the God who brings low the high tree and makes high the low tree.

This describes the nature of Jesus himself.

Just last week we heard how he was abandoned by his family, driven out of the cities and hunted by the authorities.

His life was a seed sown in the soil, bringing new life, his influence spreading like a weed.

God's work will not be quick and triumphal. Instead we are invited to trust that the mighty will be brought low and the lowly raised up.

Last week, as I lived with the reading today, I was walking at the back of the church where the little kowhai tree grows. It is a nice tree but not a big one, less than two metres. And I looked again and there was a kereru sitting in it. Several people were walking nearby but they did not see the kereru. A big bird made its nest in this little tree.

Last week we had here the funeral of a woman long associated with our church.

She had been unwell for many years and in recent years she found it hard to communicate.

She lived in the same house her whole seventy years.

And yet what emerged in the stories people told was a person who was part of a circle of friends, from school, from her neighbourhood, from her church, a person who received encouragement and support to do what she could to help and serve others and was determined to do so.

Very few people receive Queens Birthday honours or any kind of recognition.

What makes us communities is the multiplicity of care people show every day.

What makes us a church is the Holy Spirit working in and with us, beneath the surface, mostly unseen, unrecognised.

Shaping our life together.

“The earth produces of itself ...”

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
growing in courage to live the Jesus way



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net