

Sermon on Sunday 30 July 2023

by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Genesis 33. 1-11 & Matthew 13. 31-33

Little things count

Today's Gospel consists of two short parables, the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Yeast.

I have said before, and will probably be caught saying again, that the Parable of the Mustard Seed is proof, if proof were needed, that Jesus never went to Australia.

If he had, he would not have used the example of mustard, which has a fairly small seed, which Jesus used as a metaphor for smallness when he said that if you had just a mustard seed of faith, you could move mountains (Matthew 17. 20), but which grows into a fairly large plant (in this case, not the plant that Mr Colman's condiment fortune was based on, but a relative which grows above head height).

If Jesus had gone to Australia, he would have chosen for his parable the eucalyptus, the emblematically Australian gum tree. Some, like *Eucalyptus Regnans*, can reach more than 100 metres high, but their seed is tiny.

When we lived in Suffolk, we thought it would be a good idea to grow some gum trees from seed. We sent off for seed and when it arrived, I thought the man had cheated us. Then I looked hard at the packet and there was something like dust in a corner.

We planted them, they germinated and grew and we gave one to a friend with a bigger garden. Forty years later, the trunk was so big I could not get my arms round it. But Jesus did not go to Australia and he was not giving a lesson in exotic botany.

This parable emphasises how great things can grow from small beginnings - the Kingdom of Heaven, the Christian church and a great deal more.

And Jesus knew, and we know, that babies become toddlers, schoolchildren, teenagers and then adults; and Jesus knew, and we know, that little things count.

Little acts of kindness and generosity, a gentle word, a friendly smile, a sympathetic hug, gestures of encouragement all add up to a happy family, a friendly neighbourhood and a good society.

And the opposite is also true.

The Parable of the Yeast might seem just a replication of the Parable of the Mustard Seed and, yes, it also points to small beginnings and larger outcomes. But

remember that yeast had a particular place in Jewish religious practice.

Yeast, usually translated as "leaven", was forbidden at the Exodus (Exodus 12. 15) and at Passover ever since; and some offerings to God had to be of unleavened bread (Leviticus 2. 11).

Leaven came to mean insidious corruption. Jesus warned, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16. 6), and Paul talked about celebrating the festival "not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5. 8).

So, the yeast multiplying away in the dough may have been handy practically for the woman making the bread, but could equally be metaphorically the growth of all sorts of little evils spreading out of sight into great evils. Not least among the negative feelings which can lurk long and hidden in the soul are hostility, resentment and jealousy.

The first reading was about Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob had conspired with their mother to deceive their aged father and to cheat Esau out of his inheritance. I would have been angry and resentful and Esau certainly was. You can only imagine Esau's feelings about his brother and the hurt caused. Jacob solved the problem by running away and living in another country.

Now, years later, after very separate lives, both Jacob and Esau had prospered and become the heads of large families. Jacob had worn out his welcome with his father-in-law and had to move back within range of Esau; and was very frightened. The reading is about their meeting.

Esau behaved remarkably graciously in the circumstances and Jacob offered him a very substantial gift of livestock, which he had carefully paraded in sight of Esau before they met. Whether this was a genuine peace offering, or a sort of reparation, or just an inducement not to kill him, Esau accepted it.

Esau proposed that they should travel on together, but Jacob, as duplicitous as ever, slipped away in a different direction. It was hardly a perfect ending or an ideal reconciliation but at least they had met and drawn some of the poison.

Too often, hostility, resentment and jealousy stay hidden and unresolved, multiplying like the yeast, in families, in neighbourhoods, in workplaces, even, alas, in congregations.

Brethren, this ought not to be so. They ought to be faced up to, faced down and forgiven. Then, instead, let a multitude of little acts of grace encourage the growth of the sturdy mustard plant and the soaring gum tree.



Little

things

count