A Boy was sent out to market to sell the family’s final and most precious possession: their cow. They needed the money to eat. He sold the cow and on his way home met a tradesman selling magic beans. So he bought the beans and took them home to his mother who, in horror at what he had done, threw them out of the window.

And silently, without them noticing, the beans grew over night and produced a plant, which grew and grew until it reached into the clouds.

I’m sure we all know the ancient fable of Jack and the Beanstalk.

I was reminded of it when reading these two short Kingdom parables of Jesus.

‘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’. (Mark 4: 26-27)

‘The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed… the smallest of all the seeds…which grows to become the greatest of all’. (Mark 4: 30-32)

The parables of Jesus are often best understood if we first realise what they are not. They are not encoded messages for us to decipher. We can’t just look at them simply with A = God. B = Jesus, C=us. There is rarely a moral at the end unlike an Aesop Fable or a Fairy Tale. And they aren’t pearls of wisdom with an easy quote to put onto a social media feed to share with friends.

Parables are more like a narrative contrast. The word parable comes from two Greek words. Para = beside. Ballein = to throw.

My husband is a juggler and I think parable is best understood as rather like a ball being thrown side to side. We are invited ponder them, to throw them around to contrast one
thing (the vision of God’s kingdom) with another (what the world is like now) and see what happens.

The parables of Jesus normally contain within them a bit of a punch: there is within them a challenge, a shock; and often this doesn’t come at first but only when mulled over for a while.

These two little seed parables tell us something about God’s Kingdom; what God’s rule is like, in contrast to the world as it is now.

Three things from these two short parables to share with you.

**Firstly, It’s not all down to us**

The farmer scatters the seed and then just goes about his life and the seed grows and ‘he doesn’t know how’.

Every week we hear another gloomy statistic about the decline in the numbers attending church. And the church responds with ever more strategies and engaging action plans with ways to increase numbers. This week we heard we need to preach more like Bishop Michael Curry at Harry and Meghan’s wedding. So, this sermon is going to be twice as long as it was supposed to be….. only joking!

But this parable seems to say that God’s reign will grow with or without our input and it’s all a bit of a mystery as to how.

I’m not sure I like this very much as I like to think that what I do is important. We’ve just come to the end of the academic year and I like to look back with pride on all that’s past: on the services I’ve held; all the tea parties I’ve hosted; all the sermons I’ve preached. I like to take credit for what’s gone well; and I like to think that all my hard work pays off.

But I’ve also begun to realise that as College Chaplain I have very little control at all over whether any of what I do or say or preach makes any difference at all. Sometimes much of what we do seems pretty futile. Recently I received a message from someone responding to one of the Chaplaincy emails inviting students to join us in prayer for those struggling through exams asking me why on earth we would write such total nonsense.

But others stop me to say thank you for our prayers and that they made all the difference.
I don’t know why some people seem to have come to a deeper sense of faith over the last year; and others haven’t at all.

‘the farmer scatters seed and it grows, and he doesn’t know how’.

It’s not down to us.

**Secondly, God’s rule is uncontrollable**

In the second parable the kingdom is compared to a mustard seed. It is unlike the Cedar tree that we heard about in our Ezekiel reading, which is a majestic tree and used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as a picture of Kingship. The mustard bush is not a tree at all, but rather like a weed. It’s a stumpy, invasive shrub that’s hard to get rid of. It’s rather like mint which is good in small quantities but gets out of control.

The kingdom of God is like an out of control weed, it gets everywhere, and might not be particularly welcome.

We are constantly reading of church attempts to control who’s in and who’s out; who is deserving of God’s blessing and who isn’t. Who is welcome and who is not. We like to control our national borders; and we also like to control our faith borders.

A most recent example is in the Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland who have decreed that couples in committed same sex relationships can’t be full members of the Church, and their children can’t be baptised. This particular church might make a ruling over who is in and who is out of their particular community but, believe me, they do not have control over who is in and who is out of the Kingdom of God.

God’s rule will spread and grow like a weed, wherever God chooses and to whomever God chooses. In the parable the birds of the air come and nest in the branches of the tree. Remember that birds in a farmer’s field aren’t usually welcome: they eat the scattered seed. But in God’s kingdom even the pesky birds are welcomed and given shelter.

God’s kingdom will grow with abundant generosity and we can’t control it; trying to control it is as futile as trying to get rid of dandelions from the meadows. You can pull them up however often you like but they have a habit of spreading regardless.
Thirdly, and finally, our role isn’t to take credit for, or control the kingdom, but to be bearers of God’s kingdom, wherever we find ourselves. This might seem futile in the light of the global issues facing the world. Or in the face of our own struggles in life. Perhaps we have worked and worked at something to find it wither on the vine. Perhaps we have prayed and prayed for someone we love but nothing seems to have changed. Perhaps we are at a stage when it feels as if our faith is as useful as throwing magic beans out of a window in hope they might grow.

St Paul says: ‘So we are always confident.. for we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5:7)

The seed grows under the ground, silently, without anyone even noticing, and eventually shoots appear.

As we ponder Jesus’ words in these parables I hope we can find some comfort in the reminder that it’s not all down to us; God’s kingdom will continue to grow despite us; and God’s kingdom will continue to grow through us; and God’s kingdom will continue to grow because of us.

I’m going to end with a quote from a US preacher called Scott Hoezee because he sums up so beautifully what I’m trying to say:

“And so as bearers of God’s kingdom, we keep plugging away at activities which may look silly or meaningless to the world but which we believe contain the very seed of creation. We keep coming to church and singing our old hymns, reciting our old formulas and creeds…..we keep gathering at sick beds and death beads and whispering our prayers…..we keep drizzling water over squirming infants and popping wafers of bread into our mouths in faith that they don’t just mean something, they mean everything”

Each week we pray: Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

And silently, without them noticing, the beans grew over night and produced a plant, which grew and grew until it reached into the clouds.

Amen

1 http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-12a/