

090614 Sermon – Seeds of Doubt

Gospel: Mark 4:26–34

"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."

I attended a high school in country South Australia. In First Form, as we called it back then, amongst the usual curriculum, I studied Latin and Agriculture. For three years my teachers attempted to instil in me the principles of Roman grammar, conjugating verbs, declining nouns (perhaps it is the other way around?), but to no avail. Agriculture was a different matter. As sons of farmers (there were no girls in **this** class) we learned about sheep management and diseases, how to prune vines, how to deal with red spot on oranges, fruit fly, downy mildew, and a host of other things; we became apprentice shepherds and vine-dressers.

I still remember the day we dissected a wheat seed with a very sharp razor and peered at its innards through a small magnifying glass called a loupe. We were able to discern the pericarp, the aleurone, the starchy endosperm (from which our bread is derived), and the embryo containing all that is needed for germination to create a new plant. I was instantly fascinated and went on over the course of my schooling to study biological science. I was completely absorbed, in particular, by the power of genetics to explain the mysteries of plant and animal reproduction and growth. The theories of Gregor Mendel, the Czechoslovakian monk, who developed the early theory of genetics, Charles Darwin (whose most famous work on the theory of natural selection, the Origin of the Species was published 150 years ago this year) and the discovery by James Watson and Francis Crick of the structure of DNA the biochemical means of genetic action, were meat and drink for me for some years. (Actually the structure of DNA was probably discovered by Watson and Crick's assistant Rosalind Franklin who retired into obscurity while they received the Nobel Prize)

Within our science was the ultimate explanation of the very processes of life. We rose night and day, the seeds sprouted and grew and lo, we **did** know how; the mystery and meaning of life was within our grasp!

A number of evolutionary biologists, most famously, Richard Dawkins, have popularised Darwin, Mendel, and Watson and Crick's theories in books such as the Selfish Gene and the Blind Watchmaker. Dawkins has assembled much of the science I learned at school into a cogent, readable and for the most part believable account of the rise and rise of humans to become the predominate species on earth. He argues that these theories are a full and sufficient explanation of how and why we humans and all other living things arose on this earth and how we maintain and vary our specific identities. I believe this, I am not a creationist, but Dawkins goes another step; that this science has the capability of explaining all there is to know and that there is no need for God. There is, for Dawkins, no mystery.

Our Gospel reading today is all about mystery. Mark sets out in a sequence of three seed parables to explain the mystery of the kingdom. Today we read the second and third. The first which commences Ch4 is the well known Parable of the Sower where Jesus describes the Sower sowing seed on paths, rocky ground, among thorns and on good soil. Only one of these germinates, grows however it produces a harvest which is fruitful thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

For the scientists here, in Mark's parable, natural selection had provided a one in four chance of survival!

The Markan community of the first century did not have the benefit of Mendel, Darwin, Watson & Crick, or indeed Dawkins. For them the processes of the natural world were not understood and it is no surprise that Jesus uses natural parable images to convey the mystery of the Kingdom.

Taking them together, we hear Jesus making a couple of points.

1. The nature of the Kingdom cannot be fully seen by humans. Jesus himself lives this partial mystery in the course of his ministry and life with his disciples. More and more is revealed to the disciples about Jesus' expectations for the future but Jesus' real point is not made until after his death, on the Cross and his resurrection. I think we can relate to this. Despite our confidence in technology and science and in our own intellectual capabilities, there are aspects of the Kingdom that will never be revealed to us in this life.
2. The parables point out that hearing and accepting and doing the word of God, which is necessary for entry to the Kingdom, is progressive and requires patience and nurture. Today's first parable references the need for nurture – one must rise night and day to attend to the plant that is like the Kingdom of God for our appreciation of it to sprout and grow. And I am reminded of John 12 - that a seed must die and fall to the ground before it can rise again in new life.

So the Kingdom is on one reading a difficult place – it is difficult to understand, it requires patient nurturing of faith and one must die before accessing it.

More hopefully, these parables also establish that the yield of the fruit of the Kingdom is a gift of great proportion for those who do the will of God. Indeed the yield is thirty, sixty, a hundred times – beyond human comprehension. While we are unable now to comprehend clearly the prospect of the kingdom, we also cannot comprehend the scope and scale of what awaits us there. Despite our yearnings, we cannot expect to see the Kingdom nor God clearly on this earth. As Michael Ramsey, once Archbishop of Canterbury said, God is always found in cloud and darkness. And Moses died outside the Promised Land, as will we.

In comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard plant Mark's Jesus engages in some comic irony. Trees were, in the first century, used as symbols of nationhood and yet Jesus has ignored, perhaps the obvious symbol, the mighty cedar, so much a part of the symbolism and history of Israel, to be a representation of the Kingdom. That symbol adorns the flag of Lebanon today. Jesus tells us that human symbols of pride and power are not relevant in the scheme of the Kingdom of God.

Dawkins' logic follows this human pattern in that, through his pride in the accomplishments of human rationality, he assumes because it is not detectable or explicable by science that the Kingdom does not exist. Dawkins puts human rational capacity on the top of his totem pole and admits no role for faith or God. He regards faith as delusion, seeking to dismiss what millions of people profess as a form of mental illness. What arrogance, what pride in all its worst respects.

However, whereas Dawkins is confident that humans can know all, I believe the rational evidence of history is that human knowledge is always insufficient and there has always been replacement of old knowledge with new. Human intelligence has never created a complete, final and absolutely capable knowledge of anything; and will not, I am convinced, ever do so. Unfortunately for Dawkins, science does not account for faith because faith is not comprehensible to science; it defies the rational explanation on which science depends.

Just in case you think the science argument is one sided, John Polkinghorne is a quantum physicist who retired about twenty five years ago and joined our Church in England as a priest. He has

written a number of books on religion and science and makes the claim, more elegantly than I can, that the capabilities of science are, on a cosmic scale, limited and that claims like Dawkins' are somewhat shallow. Paul Davies, formerly professor of mathematical physics at Adelaide University, not a conventionally religious man, has made an elegant confession in his wonderful book, *The Mind of God*, of his perception within his study of quantum physics of a force that admits no rational explanation. This he calls the Mind of God.

I have spent some time today in declaiming the capability of humans. I don't mean to be depressingly negative but I do think we sometimes need to take a realistic look at our own claims about ourselves. And, obviously, science and all fields of human knowledge make a wonderful contribution to the life of humanity. There is a seductive risk in the idea of science and technology arming us with so much knowledge we convince ourselves we can master the world completely. We put ourselves in danger of seeking to live and live again rather than dying to live again. We may leave no space in our lives for God.

Writers like Dawkins have the power to make us doubt our faith, indeed in his latest book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins expresses the hope that religious will pick it up faithful and put it down atheist. In reading some of this material to prepare for today, I was a bit apprehensive that I might have my faith threatened, particularly as I delved into Dawkins. On the contrary, with the assistance of Polkinghorne, I found that the limited scope of Dawkins' popular science does not overcome the revelation of scripture and the thoughtful account of theology and science that Polkinghorne provides and the scientific doubt Davies admits to. I am reminded to trim my pride and I am convinced that the mystery of the Kingdom is real as Mark portrays it. Most importantly, most joyfully, and most hopefully, I find now I can sit lightly with unknowing, resist the rational and depend on a, hopefully, informed faith. A faith that I will rise night and day to attend, that will sprout and grow I know not how.

From today's reading from 1 Samuel

“... for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

Amen

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