



Becoming the weeds

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Ezekiel 17: 22-24, Mark 4: 26-34

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One of the features of being back in the long season of ordinary time is that we begin hearing gospel passages in which Jesus shares parables with his followers. These short metaphorical stories were a favourite way Jesus chose to share wisdom. The way parables work, is that they take something familiar but then exploit that familiarity to suggest something unpredictable and surprising.

When I think of teachers I've had, who also enjoyed being unpredictable, my mind goes to one particular psychology lecturer. At seemingly random moments this professor would throw some extremely colourful language into her lectures. And by colourful, I mean that she demonstrated a truly impressive creativity when it came to swearing.

This particular teacher was a specialist in human memory. Her outrageous, and I'll admit, often entertaining swearing was something she did in order to make her classes more memorable. And it worked, because 25 years later I can still remember all sort of things from her lessons, which is not true of all the teachers I have had. In a similar way, Jesus embraced the subversive nature of parables, because these stories stuck in people's memory.

Subversive stories tend to be humorous in nature. When something in a story catches us by surprise often the surprise makes us laugh. This is how most jokes work. The premise of the joke suggests something mundane, and the answer takes us in an unexpected direction. The surprise is what gets the

laugh. For example... Why don't you ever see a hippopotamus hiding in a tree? Because they're really good at it. Or... What's the leading cause of dry skin? Towels. Ok not the best jokes, but they're the only ones I know that are appropriate for a sermon. The point is, we laugh because something unexpected happens.

Many of the parables of Jesus operated in the same way. Jesus began with something ordinary and then used it to suggest something surprising. This is partly why these stories are recorded in the gospel. The followers of Jesus remembered these stories. In many cases because they were humorous or surprising anecdotes. These were stories that stuck in people's memories.

So if parables were the mechanism, what was the message? While we assume that a parable of Jesus contains wisdom, it is not wisdom instantly available. These stories are not like Disney movies where the moral of the story is laid out before us and is easy to grasp. The parable invites us into a familiar story, but then challenges us to find our own meaning in that story. Jesus clearly wanted his followers to think for themselves.

We have a tendency to sanitise Jesus. We overlook the deeply subversive nature of what he taught and reinterpret his teaching in ways that are more comfortable and less challenging. But Jesus wasn't interested in making people comfortable, rather Jesus saw a world that was in desperate need of transformation. But more than that Jesus dared to suggest that God is already engaged in that work of transformation, and that we should be too. And to make that point clearer we need to think about the parable of the mustard seed a little more deeply.

Where I grew up in Wellington we had a problem with an invasive plant. The hills where I grew up, which used to be covered in all sorts of native species, are now covered in gorse. As a child I had many encounters with gorse, none of them pleasant. To this day I still have very negative feelings about that particular plant. People had fairly similar feelings about mustard in first century Palestine may. Mustard, like gorse, is an invasive species that is very hard to get rid of once it has begun to spread.

I can imagine the day when Jesus told this parable. As the disciples passed a field that had been overrun by mustard, Jesus pointed at it and said, "Look at that field." The disciples could see the mustard that prevented the field from producing any crop at all. And then Jesus chimed in with, "The Kingdom of God is like the seed of that weed. It's tiny when you plant it, but look at it now, it covers the hillsides and even the birds are nesting in it. Once that weed takes root in even the smallest nook or cranny, there is no getting rid of it."

The image Jesus uses is a little preposterous. And while we might not fall about laughing at his suggestion that God's work is like an unwanted invasive plant, I suspect that the first people to hear this parable were at least a little bit amused by it. But the subversive nature of the story runs deeper than simply reevaluating our viewpoint on weeds.

When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God he is making a direct comparison with the Empire of Rome. Jesus was illustrating that God's action in the world is like an unwanted weed, that undermines and transforms the world of Caesar. In a country that supplied agricultural product to the Roman Empire, the suggestion that The Kingdom of God is like a weed that inhibits agricultural productivity, adds a revolutionary message to the story. Jesus was telling his followers that they

were like the weeds, they were the ones who being told they didn't belong, because they didn't fit the agenda of empire. Jesus was also suggesting that as good as the Romans were at shaping things to their liking, God's love continues to break into the world just like a weed that takes over the entire garden.

Do we believe that love is like a weed that is determined to take root in our lives no matter how many times we try to pull it out? Do we think that love is a corrupting influence, transforming what is claimed to be good into something even better? Can you imagine being one of the weeds; a nasty nuisance that disrupts the comfortable lives of the powerful. It turns out that the surprise in this particular story, is not one that makes us laugh for long.

The parables of Jesus call us into a divine playfulness that challenges and undermines the conventional wisdom of humanity. We are meant to be the weeds. We are called to grow in places where we are unwelcome and unwanted, because those of the places that might be transformed by love. Uncontainable, irrepressible, abundant love. Amen.