

We live in a kingdom. I know we do because yesterday the King Charles's birthday was recognised by the trooping of the colour parade. And my passport which I will need tomorrow to enable me to travel to my remote working destination was issued in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Island.

If previous trips are anything to go by, at some point, a local resident will ask me what is the United Kingdom like? They usually ask because they have heard so many confusing and contradictory things about the UK. And of course, it will help their understanding no end if I can answer by relating to something they are already familiar with.

In many ways I think that mirrors the situation that Jesus finds himself in; he is being asked not about the United Kingdom but about the kingdom of God. We know the kingdom of God was important to Jesus – he speaks about it on 32 different occasions.

And when he does, he uses images drawn from everyday life and describes the kingdom of God in a parable.

If it was good enough for Jesus, then hopefully it's good enough for me. Here's my modern-day parable, based on real life events in this church.

The kingdom of God is like holding out your hand in the dark.

Last Sunday I baptised a 19-year-old young man. I'll call him Sam, but that's not his real name. I'd known Sam since he was a 6-year-old, but in all that time, I'd only spoken to him on a handful of occasions...so I knew him, but at the same time didn't, if you get my meaning. I'd certainly never spoken to him about his faith so I was surprised when he called me out of the blue earlier this year and asked if he could be baptised.

He wasn't baptised as a child and hadn't gone to church. When we started talking about what baptism meant in terms of his faith, he said that he sensed he always had a faith, but it was as if it had been lying dormant within him until he visited his grandfather's grave and thereafter it was as if his faith grew slowly but surely without him actually doing anything about it until one day his faith to use his words suddenly "burst into realisation".

Someone, somewhere, somehow had planted a seed in Sam's mind and heart. At first nothing seems changed, although growth is taking place unnoticed by Sam's family and friends. Certainly, no-one is consciously taking any actions to encourage it, but the seed of faith within Sam has taken root.

He sleeps a lot and when he's awake he discovers the luxury of not doing much other than schoolwork. In other words, he's a normal teenager. Until, one day after that visit to his grandfather's grave and without Sam or anyone else realising, that seed of faith has started to sprout and having sprouted it starts to grow.

Its growth is helped when Sam starts to read a dust covered bible he found on the bookshelf in the spare bedroom. He cannot explain why he chose that particular book out of the 20 or so that were there but finds himself drawn to Jesus's teaching.

His reading coincides with his family receiving unsolicited but badly needed help and support during the Covid lockdowns from members of this church. Sam starts to ask himself why would strangers want to help? He begins to ponder on and process what he has seen and in a lightbulb moment he realises what faith in action looks like.

In the early days of my training, the then Bishop of Reading stressed that one of the most important things any Christian could do, was to be able to tell the story of why he or she held the faith they did and equally important to be succinct enough to tell it in just a few seconds; in fact the time it took for a struck match to burn out. He then gave each of us in the training group a box of matches and said: "what's your story?"

I recalled this event during my Baptism homily and rhetorically asked: "So Sam, what's your story?" I was totally taken by surprise when Sam spontaneously started to share his story with his friends and family. In his story he admitted to having times of doubt and uncertainty, but he believed what he was doing was the right thing to do.

Which opened the door very nicely indeed for me to share a further story. The then Bishop of Reading was Stephen Cotterill who is now the Archbishop of York. He has written that faith is not holding out your hand in the dark and knowing your hand will be held but holding out your hand and believing it will be held.

Sam spoke of his faith, ebbing and flowing but isn't it true that faith never grows in a straight line nor at a constant speed? And Revd Jon reminded me that it is encouraging to realise that although we as a church might feel the weight of responsibility to somehow rush about encouraging someone's faith to grow, it is the unseen Holy Spirit who is patiently nurturing the seed planted within us. And it is comforting, too, to realise that God is never impatient with us.

And let's not forget the parable of the mustard seed in Sam's story. Mustard seeds are not only are very small, but also...well just plain ordinary... and yet their produce in relation to their size is quite extraordinary. That's true for spiritual and kingdom seed too.

Back in the early 80's my spiritual seed was parched and withering...until one Sunday at the end of a service in this church someone invited me stay for coffee. Little did that person realise the consequences of that invitation....my presence here today can be directly attributed to that one small and ordinary gesture.

But it has taken time. Indeed it's taken nearly 40 years – well over half my life – as God has waited patiently for the seed sown that day to sprout, grow and finally, blossom. And that is true of Sam too.

And there have been many other small and ordinary gestures during those years which has shown me what the kingdom is like.

The kingdom is like when a person goes out of his or her way to offer someone a lift to church.

Or the kingdom is like when someone takes time out of their busy hectic life to spend 30 minutes talking to someone who is lonely.

Or the kingdom is like someone taking hold of a friend's hand to offer comfort and support as they sit beside their friend in a hospice.

In fact, the kingdom is whenever you sow God's word into another person's life by doing that small, ordinary thing out of love.

Our faith, our relationship with God grows through patiently living out all those small and very ordinary acts of kindness and love. And guess what, when we sow into the lives of others, it is God's kingdom that is enlarged and enriched in ways we can only marvel at.

Amen

And equally important, as Sam's faith grows so will his capacity to love. One day, the seed of love sown, nurtured and blossomed within Sam will also grow to such an extent that he will be able to provide shelter and comfort to others, in just the same way that the mustard seed grew into a bush where the birds of the air were able to perch in its shade.

Isn't that after all what learning to live loved is all about? Is it not holding out your hand in the dark and believing it will be held. Because as Jesus says in John 6:44, no-one comes to him unless the Father draws the person on.

Amen

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 16 June 2024**