

Signs of Hope

17 June 2018

Reading: Mark 4:26-34

It's winter. Winter can be hard on us. It's getting colder and I can't remember seeing the sun for two weeks. The cunning scientists tell us that vitamin D deficiency from lack of sun is a real thing. It wouldn't happen at St Peter's but sometimes we can get grumpy and short tempered with each other in the winter months. We need to look for signs of hope that can carry us through these dark days.

Jesus often looked to nature as a source of hope. Today he sees hope in the seed which grows even when the farmer has no idea how, and even when the farmer sleeps. Jesus sees hope in the tiny mustard seed which was the smallest seed he could think of and yet it becomes the largest of all bushes. He sees hope in flocks of birds nesting in the trees.

Today Jesus gives us three really strange parables.

To his first audience they would have seemed like jokes.

The first has a gardener throwing seeds randomly around the garden and then going to sleep. In the second parable someone sows a tiny mustard seed in the ground. Mustard was a weed why would you sow it? The third is about birds coming and making nests in your trees. Wouldn't you want to keep the birds away so they won't eat the fruit?

These parables are intended to stretch our imaginations far beyond any place we'd take them on our own. They are not to keep us comfortable and complacent but to prod and provoke us into different ways of thinking about what God's kingdom is like?

You can almost hear Jesus saying "Are you sure you want to know? Okay, brace yourself: the kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener, mysterious soil, an invasive weed, and a nuisance flock of birds."

Each morning the clergy and others gather for morning prayer. From the York room I like to sit looking out on the cemetery. When you are looking for signs of hope a cemetery isn't the first place you would look. But of course even there God is at work. Stretching from one side of the cemetery to the other is line of blossom trees. Three years ago when we first came I thought I was seeing things - but these trees blossom in the middle of winter. Right now you can see the beautiful pink blossom. They do it all again in spring. We can be reminded by the blossom trees that, even in our darkest days, God's new life is always present.

The signs of hope are everywhere. Hanging from those trees are little pendants that children from Riccarton High School put there on ANZAC Day in thanksgiving for those who have contacts to our community who died in the First World War. When we have eyes like Jesus, signs of hope are everywhere.

That's why we are putting enormous effort into restoring St Peter's Church - not because we have run out of room for everyone in the hall - which we have. Not because so many community groups want to use our hall that we can't accommodate them all - but that's true too. Nor is it because our church is beautiful with its woodwork and stained glass and a vital link to the pioneers of this community - though it is.

The reason we are so keen to restore St Peters Church is because it is a sign of hope to our community. It is a sign right on this busy corner that God hasn't finished with us yet, that there is more to life than shopping and that in God we have eternal life. It is a sign that God's love, joy, peace and hope are alive and present in our community.

Jesus, in his parables today, wants us to know that God is at work bringing the kingdom to completion even when we aren't. Jesus wants us to know that the tiniest seed planted in his name will bring forth the biggest harvest. Jesus wants us to know that God wills only the best most abundant life for us.

But a really strange thing happens. When we meditate on God's love seen in blossom, trees and churches we start to become that love

ourselves. The greatest symbol of hope that God has ever made is not trees or seeds or even birds, but you and me.

We are God's sign of hope in a needy world.

Maybe you are thinking to yourself, 'Nick has lost it this time.' How can I, with all my shortcomings, be a symbol of hope. I just don't have what it takes. Let me close with parable of my own.

She was a very keen gardener. People would come for miles around to see her garden. It was her pride and joy. In fact a number of times it was featured in the glossy pages of NZ House and Garden. If there was one thing that she was most proud of it was her lawn. Beautifully manicured not a blade out of place. Then one day the unthinkable happened. A dandelion appeared. Very soon, in fact within a week, lots of dandelions appeared. Naturally she applied the right poison which she had for just such an occasion. But then more dandelions appeared to ruin her lovely lawn. The poison didn't seem to be doing it. She tried digging them out but this left unsightly holes in the lawn. Her neighbour suggested salt but this didn't do it either. Finally, after looking on various websites, she tried steaming them. All was lost. So she wrote to Lincoln University, surely they would know what to do. She explained all she had tried and, in desperation, asked for a remedy. The head of horticultural studies wrote a short letter back: "I suggest," wrote the learned professor, "that you learn to love them."

It's only as we learn to love our dandelions, our shortcomings, that we can see ourselves as we truly are, symbols of hope and love.

What do we find it hardest to love about ourselves? Who do we find it hardest to love? In learning to live with the dandelions, God's kingdom of hope is breaking in - in you and in me .