

Sermon at St John's on Sunday 30th July 2017 (Petra Shakeshaft's last Sunday)

Generous God, you give us gifts and make them grow: though our faith is small as a mustard seed, make it grow to your glory and the flourishing of your kingdom. Amen

Today's Gospel is crammed full of the most amazing parables of Jesus. Somehow Jesus has a knack of homing in on the ordinary things of life to teach us about God...

And for those of us who have been away - this week - at Lindisfarne, the experience was just the same: the complexities of life were stripped away, to reveal the simple things (of air, earth, sea & sky), which reminded us of what really matters.

Amazing sunsets, warm earth beneath our feet, ancient stones, sand dunes and singing seals, all conspired to make God seem very close and the gift of faith something to be cherished, small as a mustard seed - but with the potential to grow into a great shrub, in which even the birds of the air can make their nests. Yes, like the ancient saints of old - Aidan and Cuthbert - we glimpsed the gap between heaven & earth as tissue thin; and human life (like animal and plant life) part of a great mystery, which we don't need to explain, merely to marvel at, in awe & wonder, as we praise and magnify God.

As the American Walter Rauchenbush put it, 'Grant us a heart wide open to all this beauty; and save our souls from being so blind that we pass unseeing when even the common thornbush is aflame with your glory.'

Today is a special day for at least two very special reasons:

Firstly because it's the baptism of little Emilia Bennett, proud daughter of Matthew and Harriet, and granddaughter of Andrew & Wendy (from our parish) & Penny & Doug... Matthew used to sing in our Choir, and it's very good to have you all back here today, as we celebrate - with godparents, family & friends - the joy of Emilia's new birth, small as a mustard seed, but with great potential for the future.

Secondly, today is special because it's Petra's last Sunday with us at St John's, after a remarkable three years as curate. Today marks both beginnings and endings; we give thanks for the seeds of faith that Petra has so lovingly sown here and we pray that they might continue to germinate. And we pray for Petra, that her ministry might grow abundantly, in her new parishes, and for the good of the whole church in this Diocese and beyond.

So as we celebrate today, the baptism - in a few moments time - of baby Emilia, and as we give thanks and pray God's blessing on Petra, let's look (briefly) at one particular parable of Jesus, with so much to teach us about our journey of faith; and with particular relevance for Matthew & Harriet; as well as for Petra, who is and will continue to be so much loved by our congregation, as she moves on. So listen to these words:

Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it

is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' (Matthew 13. 31)

In this service we have some wonderful symbols to guide and help us, at this important point in our journey of faith:

- We have bread & wine to remind us of the love of God.
- We have water & a lighted candle, to remind us of new life in Baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- We have the oil of anointing.
- And in this parable Jesus gives us one more symbol, the symbol of a mustard seed, tiny and yet full of potential, representing the seed of faith placed in each one of us - and today, especially, in Emilia, as she is baptised and begins her new life in Christ.

Now I've been looking in my kitchen and I couldn't find any mustard seeds (!), but I did find some sunflower seeds - and I want each of you, if possible, to take one, to help you think about the tiny seed (of which Jesus speaks) and what will help it grow... So have a look at this seed, its texture, its feel, its vulnerability and potential.

What are the elements, the natural things, that help a seed (like this one) to grow?

- There's light - the light of the sun.
- There's oxygen - the air that we breathe.
- There's water - the rains which fall from above.
- & there's the soil - all the nutrients that help the seed to grow.

+ Somehow these represent (by analogy) all the ways that God enables, mysteriously, the seed of faith to grow in us, and in Emilia. For:

- The light represents God's amazing energy & power & love (which St Paul says nothing can ever separate us from).
- The air represents the breath of God's Holy Spirit, given to each of us; God praying in us, with sighs too deep for words.
- The water represents the water of Baptism, our incorporation (our sharing) in the death & resurrection of Jesus, whose cross & risen life restores us to life, at every moment.
- +Finally, the soil, represents the earth beneath our feet, our common humanity, our sharing in the community of faith, our belonging & joy together, which restores us and provides us with all that we need to develop & grow. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian; we all need each other.

So remember, as you feel and touch and think about that sunflower seed (like the mustard seed of Jesus' parable), that you are amazing - for God's seed of faith is within you (a priceless gift). For right here, within you, and within Emilia and Petra, is all that is needed for an abundant life of faith. Here, implanted through the tiniest seed, is something that will grow to become great and remarkable, a shrub so big that even the birds of the air - the people among

whom you live & work & take your leisure - can find love & shelter. Here is a great miracle of growth & life & transformation, by the unseen grace of God; as our gifts are identified & grow, for the service of God's Kingdom.

For here, through the life & teaching & death & resurrection of Jesus, is the greatest gift that life can afford, within you. All you need to do is to receive this gift and allow it to grow - like the tiny mustard seed - through the fire and breath and irrigation of God's love and through belonging together, as a loving family.

+ Let me finish, as we celebrate this priceless gift of faith, with words of challenge & hope once quoted by Nelson Mandela (one of the great heroes of our time) -

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God... We are all meant to shine... We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

So may God bless Emilia abundantly, in her journey of faith; may God bless our young Lindisfarne pilgrims & all the children of this Church in their growing faith; may God bless Petra abundantly through his love & wisdom & transforming power; that we might all continue to grow, from that tiny seed of faith, to unimaginable heights, that his light might shine out, to his praise & glory, and for the good of all people, now & evermore. **Amen**