

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sunday, July 16, 2017
The Rev. Timothy Cole
Pentecost 6, Proper 10, Year A, Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

My father used to visit a retired army officer in a mental hospital in Edinburgh: The successor to the hospital, incidentally, where the two great World War 1 poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, both spent some time and, indeed, met. My father recalled once standing in the Garden of the hospital with the old boy and a nurse. At the bottom of the garden was a high stone wall, over which were the grounds of the school I went to as a boy. (We used to speculate that one or two of the teachers there might, in fact, have ended up on the wrong side of that wall!) Anyway, as they stood looking down the garden the old boy turned to my father and said, "You know, Padre, you see that wall at the bottom of the Garden?" "Yes Major." "When you die here, they throw your body over that wall." The nurse interjected at that point and said, "That's a crazy idea, Major!" To which he replied with some exasperation, "Yes, well, why do you think I am in here!" He obviously wasn't that crazy, and neither, of course, were Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. In their cases it was the world of their time that had gone mad.

I was speaking with a member of the congregation the other day who had some great ideas but said, "people will probably think I am crazy." I observed that most of the greatest movements in history were started off by people who those around them at the time thought were completely crazy.

In the year 1940, for instance, after the fall of France, a young Protestant Christian man called Roger Schutz in search of a way to serve Christ faithfully had what must have seemed to most people around him at the time like a truly reckless and crazy idea. He moved from safety in Switzerland and bought a small house near the village of Cluny just outside the German occupied territories and inside Vichy France.

He was on his own apart from his sister, whom he asked to come and help him, and three other men who joined them there in time. Refugees from the occupied territories, often Jews, came for shelter and to be looked after there. The Gestapo eventually occupied the house when he was away, and Roger had to go into exile in Switzerland until the end of the war. After the war he continued with a small group of now seven men who committed themselves to a life of simplicity, celibacy, and community. And they lived like that in fairly isolated obscurity. For 20 years nothing happened. Nothing except the quiet, faithful living of this tiny community that sought to be "signs of the presence of Christ among men, and bearers of joy." Just seven of them.

And yet, in the late 1960's young people began to come to this obscure little community which Roger, now Brother Roger, called Taize after the village in which it was set. Today over 100,000 people visit Taize each year. The crazy young man who left safety in Switzerland for war-torn and broken France in 1940 doesn't look so crazy now! Sadly, he was murdered by a mentally ill woman, but he lived to see the fruits of his craziness.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, wrote a book called *Crazy Christians* a few years ago that picks up this theme. We need more crazy Christians like that, Bishop Michael says.

“A sower went out to sow....” Today’s Gospel is one of Jesus’s most famous stories or parables. In it we are invited to compare the ground of our hearts with the ground in the story: The path, the rocky ground, the thorns, the good soil. Which am I? Am I ever the good soil?

Well, we are often the harshest judges of ourselves, and perhaps at times we find it hard to believe there is any good soil in our hearts. And yet, the yield -- the crop -- speaks for itself. Look at your children. Look at your church. Look at your friends, and see if God has not found some small patch of good soil in your life to bring forth a good harvest. The Ground of human hearts: The Divine sower casting the precious seed of the kingdom across the hearts of all people where some of it takes root and some does not.

But what about the seed? I want us to reflect today, just a little, on the seed itself. What is it? Jesus describes it here as “the word of the kingdom.” I wonder what you think of when you hear that phrase, “The word of the kingdom.” Or perhaps just “the kingdom.” I have been a Christian for 57 years and a priest for 30 of them, and if you asked me what the kingdom of God to which Jesus refers is, I would not be able to give you a simple answer. Jesus does not define it. The Bible does not define it. Why is that?

Well, the Kingdom is not just a relationship, but it is far more a relationship than it is anything else. I think this is the main reason that Jesus and the Bible do not define it in any explicit way. If you think of any relationship, a young couple getting married perhaps, you can see that they love one another, but you can’t see how that marriage will develop, where they will go, or what will become of them. That depends on what happens to them, how their relationship grows, and the decisions they make.

You can’t define what is just emerging and has yet to be. The Kingdom, as Jesus says, is at hand. It is becoming. The pathfinders of the kingdom are here everywhere already. But it is not yet fulfilled. It has yet to be. It is a seed sown in the ground.

Additionally, the Kingdom takes time. Like the seed, it lies hidden for a long time. It grows very slowly at first. It is very weak and vulnerable at first. Like the handful of souls living all those years in obscurity in Taize, the kingdom seems, sometimes, to be absurdly ineffectual. And yet, there Taize is today. After 20 years of what must have looked like eccentric irrelevance to most people of those parts, suddenly it grew into what it is now, a center where hundreds of thousands of people come every year to develop their faith and their relationship with God. The mustard seed grown into the great bush indeed.

And it’s not just big examples like Taize. Look at the work of this church. On a small scale we find time and again that good things, little sprigs and shoots of the Kingdom, start small and take time to take root and grow. Many things have begun small in the 200 years of the life of this congregation. And, because they have had the Kingdom of God in them, they have grown. And we will see what other shoots of the Kingdom may come. The Home Groups that we tried out over Lent and Easter, the Coffee and Colloquy sessions where adults from the 9.00 a.m. service gather in the Rectory once a month to discuss the 11.15 am sermon: Will they grow? If they have the Kingdom of God in them, in time they will.

The kingdom is where we discover the presence and the reign of God. It is where we find the peace and purpose and spiritual nourishment that leads us to living more truly and more fully. And yet, everything we do is only a beginning.

Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, wrote a prayer inspired by the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who many of you will know was assassinated while saying Mass in El Salvador in 1980. In this prayer, he expresses beautifully how the Kingdom is always growing, but that we only ever have a tiny, incomplete part of it. It is none the less vital a part for all that. We will never see what great things our small efforts now may grow into, but there may indeed be great things hanging on what we do and say today.

“We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.” What we do is never complete but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. “We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

As we approach the next season of our own lives that lie before each of us, whatever season that may be, and as we approach the 200th year of this congregation, we do so as workers not master builders, ministers not messiahs. Our work, our ministry is to sow seed, nurture existing shoots, harvest what is ready to be harvested, and to pass on this work when our part in it is done: All under the direction of the Master Builder and the Messiah.

Does some of what we do sometimes seem a little crazy and unlikely to make much difference? Maybe, but what we are working for cannot yet be seen. We are working for a future that is not our own.