

If our faith is grounded in trust we will flourish like dandelions in Leuven

Mark 4:26-34

The closest I can really get to parables about sowing and harvesting is a book that is a current favourite of my youngest son, Luke. It's about P'tit Loup and his potager - his vegetable patch. P'tit Loup is all excited because his dad buys him some gardening gloves and a trowel and together they are going to build a vegetable box. Then his dad produces some tomato plant seeds for P'tit Loup to plant. He's dead excited. So he sows his seeds and then.

Nothing.

Then several pages of the book are devoted to p'tit Loup asking his dad whether *now* the tomato plants will be ready, but they're not. And so it goes on until one day p'tit Loup goes to look at them and they're all green - he's so excited and says now can we eat them. No says his dad, still not ready and then a few pages later, as if by magic a beautiful red shiny tomato plant stands in the place of where P'tit Loup planted his seeds at the beginning of the book. And it all seems to have happened without him doing anything.

"The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head".

Even I know that you actually do need to get a little bit involved in the growing process from seed to fruit or flower. And for those of you who didn't already know, we actually have a tomato expert in our midst. Teus heralds from a line of tomato growers. Both sets of his grandparents had tomato farms and Teus enjoyed gainful employment harvesting the crop in his first years of summer jobs! I'd be intrigued to know your family's take on the attitude of the sower in this parable!

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the sowing method in the parable, it does offer a healthy challenge to the strategic planning and organising and thinking that consumes our lives in and out of church. There is something of the 'let go and let God' about this parable which appeals to me for us in this season of our church life together. We've got our picnic/vision day coming up and at the heart of that is a chance for us to try and discern together what is on God's heart for this church.

We have to decide what the seeds are that God might have us sow and then we have to be willing to engage in the kind of waiting game that P'tit Loup in Luke's story has to put up with. Perhaps there is someone in this parable whose role is pretty crucial, but doesn't get a mention?

We have to be still enough for God's Holy Spirit to be able to move in and show us the signs of growth and tend to them and we have to be close enough to God to know when the harvest is coming and we are needed to step back in again and take action.

It's not a bad analogy for church growth. Heartedge is an international, ecumenical network of churches and christian communities committed to renewal. I was on a call with a group of pastors and priests from the Dutch and Belgian protestant churches this week, all of whom are engaged in one way or another with Heartedge. One of the inspiring things that you find when you start looking at the stories of Heartedge member organisations, is the number of churches or communities who have planted one seed and then stepped back and watched what the Holy Spirit could do. I read about a church that decided its charism was towards creative writing and the arts, so they host writers' retreats, they offer coaching in writing short novels, their church is used as an exhibition space for the arts. All sorts of people have found their voice through time spent in church learning to write. The whole story of the church is based around an experience of working out which seed they wanted to sow and watching the Holy Spirit move. Another church, which was ready to close had a complete turn around when the priest announced he was just going to show up in the church on appointed times during the week and pray in silence.

Gradually a group of pray-ers grew up around him until there were tens of people meeting to pray in silence together and today it is a church with a strong vocation to help people develop the meditative and contemplative side of their spirituality.

Yet another in Liverpool has found its identity in being part of the open table network, which places an emphasis on welcoming all people and on having a very flat structure in terms of leading ministry. A particularly inspiring story came from Tim Vreugdenhil from CityKerk Amsterdam who after four or five years of patient discernment and moving with the Holy Spirit is ready to 'renew' a church in the Eastern Inner City of Amsterdam with over fifty people already signed up to join the church when it opens its doors for the first time on July 1. If you're in Amsterdam any time over the summer and can visit, I'd love to hear about your experience!

What unites members of the Heartedge network is that they recognise that the Holy Spirit is already at work in their communities and in society at large. The character who doesn't get a speaking part, but is crucial to the story in this evening's parable is the Holy Spirit. There is already an invisible gardner ready to do the work preparing the ground and tending to the soil once it has been planted between sowing and harvest. The task for the churches, for communities like ours, is to discern where the Holy Spirit is at work and then come alongside, sow the seeds and be ready to harvest.

To return to P'tit Loup and his tomatoes...it wasn't so much that P'tit Loup has a set of beliefs about how tomato plants grow and that as long as he articulates those beliefs correctly and becomes a good apologist for the cultivation of tomato plants the tomatoes would grow.

Actually, he just chose some seed, scattered it in what seemed like a good place to sow and then trusted (in P'tit Loup's case his dad) that something would appear. And when it did, he was ready to eat and share the fruit. He had faith the seeds would grow.

The common experience of the Heartedge churches I've talked about is one of faith. They are models of what it means to have Christian faith.

I wonder how you would describe what it means to have faith. Is it about beliefs or is it about trust?

There is a lot of talk about beliefs when it come to discussions of religion. People of religious are often invited to articulate a set of beliefs they have and so they do. But what does that really tell us about their understanding of God? And of themselves in relation to God?

The Anglican priest Sam Wells draws a helpful distinction for us. Belief, he suggests, is what the world thinks Christian religion is. People say 'Christians have beliefs' - and it usually refers to a bunch of negatives: irrational, science vs religion. You get into that whole discussion of what do you *believe* and where are the lines between belief and doctrine and and and.

But is that what the heart of the Christian faith is?

What so many of the parables in their inscrutable riddley ways seem to tell us is that faith is about trust. It's about being with Jesus. It's about placing your hand in the hand of God and walking through whatever it is together. It's actually not the footprints poem where you only see one set of footprints in the difficult times because those are the times God carried you.

Nice as that image is, it's a bit picture postcard. It's not my experience of the tough times. At moments of darkness or despair in my life I have definitely felt my feet firmly on the ground struggling to keep putting one foot in front of the other. But in those moments, the difference that faith makes is when we have experienced what it means to trust. Faith is when we experience Jesus holding out his hand to us and saying that there is nothing that you're going to go through that I won't also be going through with you.

That kind of faith is what I want more of - both for myself and for the Church and I think that is the kind of agriculture experience our parable is illuminating for us today.

And let's not forget that Jesus had a sense of humour. That mustard seed, our second and more familiar parable in tonight's Gospel, is itself a parody of Ezekiel's lofty cedar that we heard about in our first reading. Here Mark through Jesus has a laugh. For Mark, we, the church are not called to be the lofty, noble cedar, the mighty, powerful institution, we are the little mustard seed which only grows to a shrub, a big shrub, but it's still a shrub.

But you know something about mustard seed shrubs in 1st century Palestine? They're like weeds! My friends, we are invited to get busy sowing the Belgian equivalent - dandelions into the gardens of society.

And dandelions, like mustard seeds, once they start to grow can be found everywhere! Creeping into beautifully manicured lawns of stately homes, in churchyards, on motorway verges, in city squares and in our own back garden. If our faith as individuals and as church is grounded in trust we will be like little splashes of yellow all over the city.

May it be so.