

## *Of Seeds, Branches and Birds*

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024 - Mark 4:26-34)*

About a decade ago on a retreat up in the hills I sat watching little native birds darting in and out of a small native bush. As I watched I composed a poem and here are just a couple of lines that I wrote that day:

*Exploring, darting in and out  
Changing colours, changing life  
...  
A wild and precious life.*

We have before us today two little parables and as I read of the mustard seed growing into a bush that provides shelter, I remembered that day sitting and watching the birds in the small bush.

Parables are designed to engage our imaginations and expand our understanding of what Jesus is trying to say. Today's parables see Jesus speaking about seeds and sowing. Using agricultural images with which the people were familiar, to make a point.

The first parable is about stages of growth. First, a seed is planted. Second, despite what the farmer does, the seed is doing its thing below the soil. It appears to be inactive – however all its potential remains doing its thing beneath the soil. Finally, once the seed sprouts and begins to grow the farmer needs to get active and prepare for the harvest. So much of what happens is beyond the control of humans. Despite seeming inactivity or dramatic signs God is present and active and working hard to produce fruit.

The second parable concerns a mustard seed. Do you use mustard or mustard seeds or leaves in your cooking? Mustard leaves can be very hot, and grainy mustard adds a bit of zing to your sandwich. Mustard seeds are small, not the smallest seeds though. They grow not into trees rather into bushes big enough for birds to nest in, and in Jesus' time they grew vigorously and would take over vegetable gardens.

So, how are we to understand this parable. Here we have a small seed which when planted grows and grows and, in the end, provides safety and shelter for the birds of the air. An unimpressive seed can have a very impressive outcome, from seeming insignificance, comes great potential.

Jesus tells us that these images, metaphors are pictures of what the Kingdom of God is like.

Are we the seed? Are we planted by God and do we grow and grow until others can find safety, in our branches? Is Jesus showing us how once faith is planted within us this is what results, an overflowing of love?

As I have thought about this parable this week, I began to think about us being the branches where the birds find shelter.

The branches grow from a little seed, a seed that has been planted by God and contains the essence of God. Slowly it gains a trunk and all that it needs to keep growing, its

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nutrients are contained in the seed and all it needs to grow is provided by the soil, rain and sunshine. As the branches allow themselves to be nourished by God they spread out, reach out and perhaps head for the light. God's life within, reaching out into the world with its branches.

So, the branches abide in the trunk and come forth from the hidden work of God contained in the seed.

No one branch is like another. They seek the light. They are intertwined with each other. They carry the fruit. They provide safety and shelter for the birds.

How might we be the branches of God's shrub in Footscray? How can we provide shelter for others? How might we provide a safe place for others? How could we be a sanctuary for others?

When I listen to the bird segment on the ABC, they often talk about the importance of having not just great big trees in the garden, but, the importance of smaller shrubs. A smaller shrub is a place where smaller native birds can get a feed, but they can also hide from larger birds and animals in order to stay safe. Is this a little of what Jesus means when the birds find shelter?

Over the last few weeks on Wednesdays 'Open Pantry' has been handing out frozen meat in our car park. More than one hundred people line up each week to get some and they begin lining up from about 10.30am. They don't like to move from the queue, scared they will lose their place. There are people of all ages and cultures and situations lined up. The process is very orderly and no one goes home empty handed. Last Wednesday it was cold and wet, so when I arrived, I put the kettles on and set up a table with tea and coffee. People were grateful and helped themselves and some even offered to do the washing up and cleaning up.

As I reflected, I wondered if this is what it means to be the branches of God's love – providing some shelter and sustenance for the journey of these people. I began a number of conversations with those standing in the queue. Is this a picture of the Kingdom of God? People connecting with each other and we the church offering a place of understanding, literally a place of shelter, a place of safety. The Anglican priest is going to join me next week to hand out tea and coffee, if any of you would like to join us I would be most grateful. You see I think this is the building of community, it helps us begin to understand what the needs, both physical and spiritual, are for the folk of Footscray. It feels like God is providing an opportunity for us to participate in the 'hidden' work he is doing in this community. Who knows to whom, we as the branches, might provide shelter too.

The branches symbolize for me hospitality and safety. God has done the planting and sowing. Maybe we just need to be the branches offering hospitality, shelter, safety, sanctuary and welcome. God has done his part, are we ready to do ours? For whom will we be a safe place? For whom will we offer shelter and sanctuary? Whom will we welcome into our midst?

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I want to conclude with a poem from the 14<sup>th</sup> century written by a German monk called with Meister Eckhart.

*The seed of God is in us.  
Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer.  
It will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is;  
And accordingly, its fruits will be God-nature.  
Pear seeds grow into pear trees.  
Nut seeds into nut trees.  
And a God seed into God.*