

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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COMFORT AND CHALLENGE

14th June 2015

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Mark 4:26-34

When you came to church this morning, I wonder if you were seeking comfort or challenge? The gospel offers us both, but there are times when we feel more in need of one or another, although of course sometimes God gives us comfort by prompting us to respond to his challenges!

As I have been pondering the enigmatic little parable of the seed growing secretly, I have been wondering which Jesus meant, comfort or challenge, but I have decided that he meant both: that is the beauty of teaching in parables.

The comfort is found in the idea that once the seed has been scattered on the ground, it doesn't matter if the sower sleeps or wakes. Some translations give the idea that it doesn't matter if he lies awake thinking about it, worrying maybe, or if he puts it out of his mind and has an untroubled existence, sleeping well at night. It doesn't matter because it is not the sower who is going to make the seed sprout and grow, but God.

Now in terms of general husbandry of the land, we know that the sower might do well to do a bit of watering and weeding, but even so, it is not he (or in your case it might be she) who makes the growth happen, it happens because God has made the world that way. And it happens unseen, under the soil. If you keep digging it up to see if anything is happening, you are likely to kill it. You have to trust that gradually the soil and its moisture are working on the seed and that life is beginning to form and grow. You have to trust.

I was thinking about that sower and picturing him lying on his bed – two pictures, him lying awake worrying and him sleeping, and as I did so I thought of other people, some of them here this morning, who have recently had things which they could, if they chose, have lain awake and worried about. People with health worries, with family worries, with worries about the future, with worries about the present. People with decisions to make, with decisions being made for them or about them. People who don't understand why life has taken this or that turn that wasn't what they planned or hoped for. People who are concerned about things that are happening in the world. Heavens, when you begin to think about it it is a wonder that any of us ever lie down and sleep quietly in our beds at night!

And then I thought of prayers that I have seen answered recently, and that other people have seen answered. And every single time the answer has not been what was expected, what we had thought would be the best way forward, the best thing God could do. Every time it was better. Obviously I can't share people's personal stories in a public sermon, but here is something you could try: think about your own answers to

prayer that you have seen, the big things or the small, and after the service, if you have a chance, find one person you can tell about them, or one of them. Maybe the person you speak to will be able to share something that they have known as well.

We can't see the seed sprouting under the soil and we can't see what God is preparing in answer to our personal prayers and our prayers for the world and all its people.

And then we should think about that story from the Old Testament, that familiar story about the choosing of a king. Samuel is grieving over Saul. Saul had been a young man with whom the old prophet had worked for a long time, guiding him, helping him from the day when he was first called to be king. But Saul had moved away from Samuel's good advice and guidance, away too from God's good advice and guidance, and Samuel was grieved. If he was grieving over Saul, then I expect that in his prayers he would be praying for Saul, asking God to restore him to God's way, to being a good king for his people. Samuel's ideal answer to prayer would have been a repentant Saul.

But God knew that this was not the best solution. A repentant Saul would still only have a short time to be king, and then who would lead God's people? And so God led Samuel to Bethlehem, to the family of Jesse. And we all know the story of how the fine, strong sons of Jesse were paraded before Samuel like contestants in a beauty pageant, or a Mr Universe competition. And it was none of these. And how David was sent for and although he was scarcely grown-up, and the least important, as the youngest, yet God chose him, because he looks on the heart. How many sermons have you heard about this story, reminding us that it is our hearts that matter, what we are like on the inside, not what we look like or even how we behave in public which impresses God. And that is true.

But have you ever wondered what it was like for David? We all know that he was a godly young man, using his time with the sheep to also pray and sing to God. But I doubt that in his prayers he ever asked if he could be king! It just wasn't something that would happen. If we are to judge by his psalms, and we don't know at what period in his life most of his various psalms were written, but judging by them, we can see that he was a man given to promising to serve God. "I shall live for him" he says on occasion (Ps 22:29) Another time he says "Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me. For you are the God of my salvation, for you I wait all day long." (Ps 25:4-5) And there are many similar verses in his songs. David was a young man who wanted to do God's will.

Still, when that will was revealed, when he was sent for from the sheep and found himself before his whole family – an imposing array, by all accounts – and the prophet Samuel – and everyone knew about the prophet Samuel. When Samuel anointed him with oil, setting God's seal on him as the next king, how would David feel?

I know what it is like to ask people to take on a job! I know what it is, for instance, to ask someone to become an elder, to say that the Session has asked them to consider this calling and this step. You do get some interesting responses! In the context of being asked to take something on, someone once said to me "Why do people insist on seeing more in me than I think is there?" Ah, that is the question! That might be a question that many of us would ask! And the answer is that people see deeper into you than you do yourself. We too often see the flaws in our lives and our personalities, and find it hard to see past them to the good, the gifts, the potential, all of which are given by God.

David was like the seed and had been growing in secret, growing into a man who was in tune with God, who worshipped God, who loved God and wanted to obey him. He had been growing, like the plant in Jesus' parable – first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. Samuel came along at the time when he was ready for harvest, and suddenly there was the answer to Samuel's prayer, appearing before his eyes. When he anointed him with the holy oil, it was his way of thrusting in with the sickle, of recognising that the harvest time had come and he had to do something about it.

And that is the challenge. If the comfort is that when we have committed a matter to God, then we can trust him to be working on it secretly, unseen, then the challenge is for us to be ready to recognise when it is time for us to act. There is no point in the sower lying awake and worrying about his seed, while God is doing the work of making it grow. That is God's part. There is no point in us lying awake, or otherwise fretting, about the things which worry us if we have brought them to God in prayer. We leave them before his throne, we lay them in his hands and we have to trust that he knows what to do with them, about them. But there may come a time when, recognising that God has been at work, we have to do something. The sower will still not get his harvest if he does not thrust in his sickle. If he just leaves it, it will go to seed and be wasted.

I know that as a church and as individuals we have often and long prayed for our village. We have prayed for individuals within it, and we have prayed for the atmosphere and ethos of the community. We have prayed to have better contact with some of the families, and perhaps particularly those families whose needs are more obvious. A couple of weeks ago we had a very special Messy Church. We were Christening the baby of Ashleigh and Stewart, who until recently lived in Creag Dhu Avenue. Now that is one family for whom some of us in St. Bride's we have prayed for a long time. On the day we had an influx of all kinds of people, some friends of Ashleigh and Stewart, some who had heard that there was something special going on, some who had questions about baptism "I want to get my husband baptised," said one woman, whom I know. And it was chaotic. Messy Church is not supposed to be overly structured, but it does have a pattern, and that pattern was almost lost in the conversations and questions and noise and excitement of the day. And you know, dealing with that, accepting that, acknowledging that may be part of the thrusting in of the sickle that we are called to. We have prayed and if God is now going to be giving us the chance to interact with people who need him, we will find that we are called to do something, to accept changes, to have conversations that we never thought we could, to be alongside people in all sorts of emotional and practical situations. Two weeks ago at Messy church God took our order and made what looked at times a bit like chaos, and God took the deeper chaos which was lurking behind questions and smiles and tears, and brought it into a bit of order by his love.

Comfort and challenge. Comfort when you don't know what to do or what will happen or what is going on – the comfort that God is working his best way out in secret, keeping his solution from our well-meant meddling until it is strong enough for us to see and recognise it. And the challenge of seeing God's solutions and joining in, doing our part, even if it is not a part that we had ever thought of for ourselves – like David. May God challenge our faith with his comfort, and comfort us by giving us his challenges and opportunities. Amen.