

## All By Itself

Mark 4:26-29

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma, February 11th, 2001

"You will remember that late last year Session presented an eight point vision for the congregation based on Session's study of the "Natural Church Development" material. The eight points were: **enabling leadership, gift orientated ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic groups, need orientated evangelism**, and **loving relationships**. Now, what is the point of these eight characteristics? Is this the latest formula for church development and growth? Is this a pragmatic, statistically proven formula – follow this eight points and you will have a great, growing church and lots of converts?

Not at all. When we develop a vision for our congregation we do so in the recognition that it is God who brings about His kingdom. Much as we might desire it, we cannot give our children faith, no matter how well we teach them in Sunday School and Catechism. We cannot manipulate our neighbours into believing no matter how well we develop a need based evangelism. That is the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who draws people into the kingdom. But does that then mean we sit back and do nothing, for God will make it all happen? Should we, like the hyper-Calvinists, say it's all in God's will, which will be done any way? So we do not need to consider our leadership style, our structures, our relationships. What is the relationship between God bringing in the Kingdom and our being His instruments in doing so?

Well Jesus tells us here in His "Parable of the Growing Seed". Jesus in this parable is telling us that the Kingdom of God, i.e. God's reign over our lives, and over everything, is a mystery. It is something that happens without us always being aware of it. It is something that happens *"all by itself"*. Jesus says the *"Kingdom of God is like ... a man who scatters seed on the ground."* And then *"Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."* This parable links in with the earlier one about the "Parable of the Sower". Sowing the seed equals the spreading of the Good News. That parable emphasised human responsibility. Whether the seed sprouts and grows to a good crop depends on the person's response. Do they heed the word and take it in? Or is it choked out

by the demands and worries of the world etc? Now this parable in our text emphasises God's sovereignty. The human responsibility here is that the farmer is to ensure that he has properly tilled the soil, fertilised it, that he waters it. He has to make sure that everything is the best it can be for the seed to grow. But for the rest all the farmer can do is wait. He must wait and trust. How the seed actually germinates and from it comes a whole new plant- he doesn't know. He can give it the best environment for growth, but he cannot cause the seed to sprout and grow. It is the same in the spiritual realm. We as church must create the best environment we can for the Word of God to be sown in our lives, in our children and in our neighbours etc. Having a leadership that enables each of us to discover and use our gifts, having worship that is deeply inspiring and a church community that is deeply caring and loving, all contribute to that ideal environment for change and growth. But the actual change in people's lives, the conversion to belief is the work of God. It is something He does in His own mysterious way. It is something we cannot cause, nor know how, and when it will happen. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:5ff " *What after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*" And notice also what Jesus said in John 3: 8 " *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You may hear it's sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*"

Now in verse 28 of our text Jesus goes on to say, " *All by itself the soil produces grain- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.*" Note Jesus' emphasis " *All by itself*". A more literal translation of the Greek is " *automatically*". In other words it happens without any visible cause, it happens apart from human help. Like I said, a farmer can set the environment for the seed to grow, but he cannot cause it. It happens by itself. After sowing the seed it seems for a while that nothing is happening. He can walk outside and look in his paddock or garden and here's nothing to see. All he can do is wait. Till gradually he sees the plant push through the soil and over time it grows to its full. So it is with the Kingdom of God. Over time we can teach and disciple our children, ministers faithfully preach and elders visit and we care and pray for each other, we use our gifts and develop relationships with

workmates and neighbours. Often it seems that our efforts achieve little. Nothing seems to be happening. And then the Spirit of God can blow on our lives. He is always active, but it doesn't always seem that way. The Spirit, unseen, mysteriously works with the Word in our hearts, in our children and in that neighbour. There comes a sense of sin and repentance, a real desire to know God and feel His forgiveness and grace. Assurance develops that we are indeed saved and we are God's children. And as such we begin to look forward to our inheritance with Him. Our thinking changes from focusing on ourselves, to thinking about what God wants in our lives, we seriously ponder how to obey God in our work, in our family, in education. In gratitude for His grace our hearts seek more and more to serve Him in all of life, to bring Jesus all the praise and glory. The seed has sprouted and grown and the *"full kernel is developing in the head"*. The Kingdom of God is being established on earth. Like with a plant the growth, the changes, are often so gradual we don't perceive them. We don't know how it happens, but it's there, not by our doing, but *"all by itself"*- or should we say, by the awesome power of the Spirit of God. We may not perceive it. We cannot cause it, or even stop it. In fact nothing can stop it, not even persecution. What God has commenced nothing can stop, not even death.

Nothing can stop the mysterious work of God in our lives. Nothing can stop the coming of the kingdom. It comes by itself, automatically; it is God's work. When we look at life around us we may wonder where the Kingdom of God is, because we don't always see it. So often, it seems, nothing seems to be happening. When we hear of the awful devastation, say in India with the earthquakes, when we see the constant tension in the Middle East over Jerusalem, the Holy City for three major religions and millions and millions of believers, when we hear of the corruption charges of leaders in the Philippines and Indonesia, of the rioting charges against our own members of parliament, when we see the road carnage, the abuse in our own land, when we dare to look inside ourselves and see our own sin and lust, we wonder, we cry out, where is the Kingdom of God? Where is the reign of God on earth? It's no wonder we hunger at times to go to the Lord's Supper to be reminded, to be reassured, that the Gospel is true, that we are forgiven, that the Spirit is at work in our lives, the kingdom is truly coming. But Jesus in our text tells us to trust, to be faithful and wait and see. The Kingdom will come. The seed will grow and ripen.

*"And as soon as the grain is ripe, the farmer puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*(:29) Notice the tension in the way Jesus puts that. *"As soon as .. the grain is ripe"*. Farmers know that delay in harvesting can cause the grain to go off. You harvest without delay. What Jesus means is, when the Spirit of God has worked in the heart of all those God has called, then the final judgment will be here. There will be no delay. God will not hang around. He is not an inactive God, procrastinating. He is very much at work. Nothing can stop Him or change Him from His path. And as soon as all God's elect are in, the harvest will come. In other words, the victory of the Kingdom is an absolute certainty. It will come and it's all set in God's time. It may feel to a lot of people, that God is no longer around. That the church is old hat, that the idea of the kingdom of God is an outdated concept that's had its time. Don't be taken in by the thinking. Don't be taken in by your own doubts and struggles. *"All by itself, the seed is growing"*. The kingdom is here and the harvest is coming.

The harvest, i.e., the day of judgment, reminds us of why it is so important that we as a church are faithful to our calling. All of life, everyone who is alive and has ever lived, everything thought and said and done, is coming to this harvest, to this judgment. And how they all fare depends completely on one thing- how they responded to Jesus, to the call to believe in Him. It is true that we cannot cause the seed to grow. But our responsibility, as God's servants, *"God's fellow workers"*, as Paul puts it, is to *"plant the seed"* and to *"water"*. As the farmer knows the best conditions to have the seed grow, like working the soil, fertilizing and watering, so the teaching of scripture and church experience show us the best conditions for the seed to grow in our congregation; like enabling leadership, passionate spirituality, holistic groups, loving relationships etc. And when we know what is at stake, the eternal lives of all of our children, our friends, our neighbours and us, then we will not take for granted the issues raised in the vision. Too many have walked away because they did not experience the love of Christ, because they were not inspired by the worship, because they have little opportunity to use their gifts, because they were not disciplined by the church leadership. When we are called to come together in worship we should do our utmost to be there. For through it the seed is given the environment to grow. When we are given the opportunity to form groups for fellowship and bible study, we should put aside whatever we can to be there to create the environment for the seed to grow- in us and in others. Nothing so disheartens as worshipping with so few when so many did not make the effort.

Nothing breaks down a group as quickly as when many claim to be too busy and don't really want to join in. What God requires of us is that we are obedient to Him, gratefully, passionately doing what His word requires.

It is a good thing that the coming of the kingdom, the growing of the seed, is God's work, a work that will not fail, despite our failures. That is a chastisement for us, but also great reassurance. The harvest will come. Those forgiven in Christ will gain the victory. As the Lord's Supper reminds, it's all by grace, sheer grace. It is God's doing, through the death and resurrection of Jesus."

Guidelines for discussion at Bible Study Groups:

1. Why is the kingdom of God like a seed that grows "all by it self"? What point does Jesus make in this parable? Why is the growth of the kingdom mysterious? Why do we have to wait and trust?
2. The farmer cannot cause the seed to grow, what he must do is to provide the right environment for the seed to grow. How is that true for us spiritually? How do we create the right environment in the church? How do the eight characteristics of the church Vision fit in here? Which of these eight characteristics do you think we need to work on most in our congregation?
3. Have you seen a growth of the kingdom in your own life? E.g. Changing from your own will to do God's will, striving to serve him at work, in the home, in "all of life". Where would you see yourself on this growth continuum? Do you struggle at times to see the kingdom in your own life, in the world? Do you find it hard to trust and wait, to pray for the Spirit to do His work?
4. Does the idea of the "harvest" give us a sense of reassurance, or urgency or both? Explain. What is at stake? Are you ready for the harvest? How ready is your family, friends, workmates, neighbours? What can, will, you do about it? Does any sense of urgency affect how we see our church environment and the eight points of the church vision?