



Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 24 July 2011

The Mustard Seed

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Romans 8.26-39; Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

Do you believe that God works miracles? The Bible seems to be full of them. We cannot surely simply dismiss them as imaginary events. We can see them as metaphors or symbols for something greater, speaking beyond their specific context. Yet that does not take away from the fact that these narratives are not like fairy tales but like real events described as happening to real people. In the scriptures God seems to enter into lives in a real and palpable way. God intervenes. God changes things. Ask people in countries which we call the developing world if they believe in the miraculous and nearly everyone will think your question absurd: of course they believe in the miraculous. Everyone has seen it, witnessed it for themselves: the time the flood turned back and did not wash away their home, the time the waves did not sink their fishing boat but the storm suddenly blew itself out, or the time the child who seemed near to death suddenly turned the corner and began to make a recovery no one believed possible. Perhaps these developing nations, as we like to call them, are more spiritually developed; perhaps they have eyes to see what we have become blind to; perhaps there is an attentiveness to the things of God that we have forgotten. Or perhaps miracles belong to a pre-rational world which we have simply outgrown. Perhaps the world has simply moved on, and this kind of religion, like Rupert Murdoch, belongs to the past and we have now seen through the lies and deceptions. Perhaps we no longer need a mythology about God in whom we should put our trust. Perhaps, as Richard Dawkins delights in telling everyone, when you are up thirty thousand feet in an aeroplane, it is not God you need to trust but the engineers who constructed the plane and the pilot and navigator.

And yet break away from the familiar for a moment, break away from the diversions and the activities, the work and patterns and the computer which keep us endlessly occupied, and suddenly we are thrown back again into the mystery of it all. For me last week this meant two days in a tent in a field on holiday in the rain, changing my perspectives. Suddenly you are in the miracle, experiencing it again: the wind, the grass, watching the rain clouds advancing, watching for the windows in the grey, the shafts of light that can bring summer back in an instant. Or lying awake, aware of the night, the rain drumming on the tent walls, the long walk through wet grass in the dark to the toilet block, the size of the moon, the time the sun rises and its power to transform all with yellow bright warmth. Break with the usual, the routines and pressures that drive us and there it is suddenly, the mystery of our lives, raw, frail, unexplained, unexplainable, beautiful. Time and time again we can be jolted back into the mystery of our life. The things that really matter.

Last week, next door at Number Six, a huge downpour of rain and a blocked drainpipe suddenly meant that Nick Holtam was no longer preparing for his ordination or finishing off his e-mails but up there on the roof fighting to stop a flood of water pouring through the ceiling. Suddenly perspectives and priorities changed. Yesterday we heard the sad news of a tragic death of one of our very popular members of staff, who had been working in the café the night before. Ladka and some of the café staff in shock going to leave flowers at the place where he died. One moment with us, and bringing joy, now gone.

The mystery of our lives and mortality are all around us, ready to break us open. But habit has sometimes deadened us. We have created systems of control with which we push back the unknown and create the delusion of security: life without miracle, life anaesthetised, risk assessed, measured

and contained. Life which does not question its meaning, so that tragedy or illness or death leave us lost and without the tools to approach them.

I have just been reading about Barney Simon, a writer and theatre director in South Africa who in his productions grappled with the real world seeking to discover the miraculous within the everyday in Johannesburg, giving a voice to the voiceless – during the time of Apartheid he staged multi-racial plays anywhere he could: in warehouses and shantytowns, storefronts and back yards, finally setting up a theatre known as the Market in Johannesburg. This is a speech he gave:

I believe we live in a place of miracles. I haven't seen a burning bush except a fire or two. I've never followed a travelling star or even fantasised a flying saucer. But that's not a complaint. The miracles that I like best are those that give evidence of the grace that is in all things. Every adult South African sitting in this auditorium was born into an insane world. Insane because it denied and confused mankind's greatest gift, the equality of our humanity. But here is the miracle. Despite our beginnings, there's our people – multiple, vivid, absurd, treacherous, generous, adventurous, divinely pragmatic and always capable of our sound of survival – laughter. We who began this theatre did it out of love of this humanity.

This is indeed the miraculous if only we have eyes to see. The miraculous which has a thousand different faces. We need to re-imagine God. Not a God whose miracles fit neatly into our list of wants but a God who surprises us in the multiple mysteries and experiences of our lives. If we have eyes to see, every birth is a miracle, every plant, every cloud, every morning's rising sun, each gulp of air we breathe, each muscle which gives us movement, each thought and impulse, all part of the miracle of life. It is not that we should deny the brilliance of technological progress, it is simply that the living eye or the ear are a billion times more miraculous than any electronic gadget.

In Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel we have a chapter of discourse which is known as the parables of the kingdom. It is a chapter which consists of seven parables and some explanations of them. Structurally they are at the centre point of the entire Gospel. Everything is concentrated on the kingdom of God. A kingdom which is coming and yet which yet remains mysterious. Jesus takes universal symbols of sowing, planting, harvest, cooking bread, searching for treasure, fishing with a net, to open insights into the nature of God's relationship with us and the world. I have always loved Christ's parable of the mustard seed, that smallest of seeds, so very small, so seemingly insignificant and yet when sown in the ground the seed which can become the greatest of all trees. This is the miracle of God, a miracle all around us. God's life beginning at the very bottom, in the smallest of all seeds, the most humble, the most insignificant. The very thing that seems incapable of changing anything. Life, from the humility of dust. And I begin to realise that this simple truth holds true of all that is miraculous and life giving. That God in Christ begins the work of life right down at the very bottom, something small and insignificant but which grows from the bottom up. The kingdom of God begins here and now, not in some idealistic never-never-land. Not a kingdom which is overbearing and oppressive, but a life where its own life is always at stake. Neither does this life depend on status or celebrity or wealth or ethnic background or power or manipulation or spin. It begins with a small honest seed given by God. A seed planted in radical generosity and faith. We are *not* told to begin with the tree but the seed, to plant it and nurture it in your own life and the lives of others. The kingdom begins to grow in darkness, where you are least expecting it, perhaps without you even realising. It often grows at times where you feel yourself almost overcome and broken open, it is then that seed of God grows in you.

I was struck by this at the ordination of Nick Holtam, as a Bishop on Friday. There he was, surrounded by all this huge tradition of magnificence and pomp. Yes, that is what it did seem like, as we were escorted off into the wings and the central section of that magnificent dome of St Paul's with its tiers of angels and saints filled up with numerous processions of unknown dignitaries, Canons, chancellors and bishops, each line-up more important than the last, dressed like birds of paradise. And yet there, in the middle, our former vicar Nick, vulnerable, human, loved, kneeling down to have hands placed upon him and to receive the gift of God's miraculous Spirit. In the context of this Cathedral and all that surrounded him as small as a mustard seed and yet for all of us

there, here was the person that gave meaning to the whole event, the sign of all that, and which only, can transform the church: God's humility, God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's love. In the midst of all the grandeur it was that which held the light. And the light which lit up Nick did not just belong to Nick, it belonged generously, miraculously, to all those who had gone to the Cathedral to witness. At the end of the day that is what we carried away with us: not the pomp, but the utter wonder and simplicity of God's grace. Nick, standing on the steps of St Paul's in the wind surrounded by those who shared his joy in God's calling and wanted to uphold him. That simplicity is of course most fully expressed by a sign which may seem as small and insignificant as a mustard seed: the breaking of a piece of daily bread and the sharing of a cup of wine. Christ in each one of us.

On the floor of this church leading up to that altar you will see a collection of 110 pairs of different feet, of all colours and sizes and patterns and shapes: rough, smooth, neat, torn. Each of those feet belong to a different member of the congregation who attended the Parish weekend last week at Worth Abbey. As a whole they represent the diversity of our whole wider community the church. Each of those feet, just as each of you here today, are a miraculous, unique life, a life given by God and called to come by God. A life which may seem as incapable as a tiny seed of ever changing anything, and yet each life capable of growing in love and grace and becoming the tree which provides shelter and sanctuary to others. It is an incredible image of both diversity and of the miracle of hope. No two footprints the same and yet each belonging to the same journey, each capable of giving life and energy and meaning to the other.

In our own lives our sense of or hold on God may feel very precarious at times. But it is that miracle of God's love at work in each of our lives which is our hope. That is of course true of this church too. We may all feel as though we are bereft of a vicar at the moment, who has meant so much to many of us. But in this time of interregnum, we are perhaps more aware than ever that each one of us is the Church. The footprints of each one of us making up the pattern and the life and the journey which weaves us together. Each one of us called to grow into the tree and branches in which all the birds of the air can make their nests. And I know that the branches and the leaves and of course the birds will continue to be just as unique and suprising and mind-bogglingly miraculous as ever. I know this because we have such an incredibly diverse collection of mustard seeds in this place which will surely continue to grow into a multi-leaved and coloured botanical garden, as we try to live God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.