

Dear Friends,

The number of times in the Gospels people ask Jesus questions is apparently 183. The number he answers directly is 3. You could check this for yourself if you want to! There are different reasons why he does not respond to questions. Sometimes the people asking do not really want to know the answer. They want to catch Jesus out by getting him to incriminate himself - should we pay taxes to Caesar or not? Sometimes they want Jesus to congratulate them for knowing the answer already, for being clever and righteous. The rich young man, for example, asks what he should do to inherit the kingdom of God. He does not want Jesus to tell him, he thinks he knows it already; he only wants Jesus to say, 'You have got it right, how wonderful you are.'

Jesus, however, does not go along with them and play these games. He will often turn the question round on the questioner - why call me good master? There is only who is good, your father in heaven. But there is, I think, a deeper reason why Jesus does not respond directly to questions, which is that it is not answers to questions that we need, it is faith and loving God, being open to his love of us. This is why his indirect, subtle replies are intended to open up the dimension of faith in his questioners and invite them to be more open themselves, not thinking they have everything properly worked out, but far more being travellers on a journey of discovery.

You could perhaps construct a complete, convincing and watertight argument as to why people should believe in God (nobody ever has done yet!), but it would not necessarily help them to belief or do them or oneself any good unless there is a real faith at work, faith which is much more a matter of relationship, which can be random and chancey, than secure knowledge. Faith can go beyond knowledge, or perhaps lead to a kind of knowledge which is deeper and truer than knowing things by convincing arguments. There are of course different types of knowledge: knowing that $2 + 2 = 4$ is not of the same order as knowing that God exists, is real and present to one. That can only come through inner conviction, not outward reasoning. Once you know God in that deep, inner sense you will still have doubts and questionings, but you will be secure in dealing with them and will no longer need or seek answers to questions that are really puzzles or conundrums. As we saw two weeks ago thinking about the Trinity, God the Three-in-One is not a mathematical sum! It is the expression of our human experience of how we know God in ourselves and in the world.

Another finding about the Gospels is that Jesus asks others more questions than he is asked himself, 307 in fact. In the passage for this Sunday, for example, he asks, 'What can we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable can we find for it?' He has suggested himself that it is to do with seed sprouting and growing all the time whether we are aware of it or not. Now he answers the question himself: it is like a mustard seed which is the smallest of all seeds, but can grow into a great bush. You will notice that he does not say: the kingdom of God is ... A, B, C; but the kingdom of God is *like* ... It is not something that can be understood and explained completely in our human terms, we can only suggest what it is like by pictures or images.

This may be the reason why in his teaching Jesus so often uses parables, stories which again

suggest what the kingdom is like. They not close the discussion, but open it up, because a parable is a story that does not have one fixed definite meaning, but rather appeals to our imagination and invites us to explore for ourselves what our response to God is going to be. The stories and illustrations Jesus uses are often drawn from details of the agricultural society of which he and his listeners were members, as here. He establishes common ground which they can relate to, because the story is about things that come from their own experience, their own way of living. But the story will often go beyond that common experience and startle them with striking implications: of the three people who might have stopped to help the man set on by robbers, it is the Samaritan, the despised outsider, who does so, the one they would least expect to do this, not the priest or levite of their own religion. So the parable challenges the listener to expand their sense of what God's kingdom is and how he operates. The elements of the story may be taken from ordinary life, but it is not *about* ordinary life, it is about the kingdom of God.

I once brought back from a visit to the Holy Land a packet of mustard seeds. They come as small pods which can be split open and contain numberless tiny individual seeds, just little specks, each one of us which can grow into that great bush. In the church one day I left the packet on my seat and invited people afterwards to take them and sow them. All the pods went, and some time later one person said to me that he sowed the seeds in his garden and the parable was right! They did not all take, but one or two did grow into big bushes.

What is this parable saying to us? One idea may be that God is present in the minutest, most insignificant and unnoticed details of our world - and that his presence can always expand and burgeon from there into marvellous, un hoped for growth. Here is another aspect of the parable, that it enlarges our sense of the mystery and wonder of God. Now that we have returned to what is called in the calendar of the Church 'Ordinary Time,' I think it is good that we try to keep with us through the year a sense of the mystery and wonder of God. Ordinary time sounds rather dull and well, ordinary, but it is really always *ordered*, proceeding in a certain direction, and *extra-ordinary*, filled with the presence of God who can do all things and create marvels of love and truth out of the smallest, least promising material. The more open we can be open to the mystery of God, the more we will be aware of his wonders all around us every day.

In the Gospel readings for this Sunday we hear that Jesus 'would not speak to the people except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone.' As the Church and his disciples today, it is for us to seek the explanations for ourselves, and we do so best by seeking God in the ordinary things of our everyday life, which after all is where we are most of the time -and therefore where, for us, God is.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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