

SERMON: 2018/06/17 (4th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17 & Mark 4:26-34_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

I mentioned last week that, at this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus was in the north of Israel/Palestine - in Galilee - and so *enormous* was the crowd now following Him, undoubtedly because they hoped to see His miracles, that the only place that could accommodate them all was around - and on! [see: Mt. 13:2] - the lake of Tiberias, which could function as a natural amphitheater, [n.1]. (That means it made Jesus' voice louder.)

Well, instead of doing wonderful things like healing lepers or soothing fevers - as He had been doing [see: Mk. 1.31 & v.40], He began to teach them 'many things', [4:2]. (And in Matthew's longer version, *these* lessons are called "the Sermon on the Mount.")

Anyway, a lot of what Jesus said probably 'perplexed' the crowd [for this word in Mark in the NRSV see: 6:20 & 10:24] and confused them; and so, later, in private, the Apostles came and asked Him to elaborate (for their sake). And by way of doing that, He told them a whole *series* of parables including two that we heard this morning:

One of these was about a mustard seed.
Have you ever seen one?
Maybe in salad?

They are *very* small and *very* spicy, and Jesus says that *this* is like the Church. It can seem innocuous, quaint and inconsequential *but(!)*, eventually, when Jesus comes back, it'll be the 'greatest', *biggest* organization ever [v.32], and 'fill...the whole earth' [Dan. 2:35], which sounds so wonderful that I hope we'll all be part of it.
Don't you?

But sadly, not everyone will:
In the other parable, Jesus said that God is like a farmer with a sickle.
That's this: [brandish cardboard prop]
And He's waiting until just the right amount of 'grain' is 'ripe' to swing it.
And He was talking about people. We're the 'grain'.
And we're ready for that "sickle" only when we're 'justified' by confessing our need for Jesus to save us, [see: Rom. 3:24].

Let's pray:

Father God, make us ready for God and His 'kingdom' [v.26 & 30] by giving and increasing our trust in your Son, Jesus, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

Allow me to reiterate:

Jesus says that there is a "sickle."

Not a literal one, of course.

But the event - the moment - it symbolizes is real - either that or Jesus is a liar - and it is of the utmost, *sharpest* relevance to every single one of us - to all that have lived and will live.

And it was his awareness of such that made Saint Paul say, as we hear in 2 *Corinthians*, that '[f]rom now on, therefore, we regard no one from [just] a human point of view...' [2 Cor. 5:16a]

And I hope to "nudge" you, today, to sharing that outlook with him, which is, to be clear, also Jesus' outlook - indeed, the very motivation for the Incarnation itself.

[Pause.]

But first, a story from Ancient Greece:

'Dionysius, *tyrant* of Syracuse, was *not* happy, in spite of all his wealth and power. ...[for h]e was...haunted by [a] constant fear [of a coup]...

We are told that he was so afraid, that he never went out unless surrounded by [body-]guards, sword in hand[;] and never walked into any room until his servants had examined every nook and corner, and made sure that no murderer was hiding there.

...[and] no one was allowed to come into his presence until *thoroughly* searched, so as to make sure that the visitor had no weapon hidden about his person.

When his barber once jokingly said that the tyrant's life was daily at his mercy, Dionysius would no longer allow the man to shave him.

Instead of the barber, Dionysius made his wife and daughter do this service for him, until, growing afraid of them also, he...[simply] let his beard [and hair] grow [inordinately long].

Suspicious people are *never* happy; and, as Dionysius thought that everybody had

as evil thoughts as himself, he was always expecting [the worst of others]...

His sleep, even, was haunted by [this] fear; and, lest some one should take him unawares, he slept in a bed surrounded by a deep trench [dug into the ground]. There was a [single] drawbridge leading to the bed, [but] he always drew [it]...up on his own side, so that no one could get at him to [kill] him in his sleep.

[And yet a]mong the courtiers who daily visited Dionysius there was one called Dam'o-cles [who] was a great flatterer, and was never weary of telling the tyrant how lucky and powerful and rich he was, and how enviable was his lot.

Dionysius[, however,] finally grew tired of hearing [t]his [sychophantic] flattery; and when[, one day, Dam'o-cles]...added, "If...only [I were you, then] I should be the happiest of [all] men," the tyrant offered to take him at his word[:]

By his order, Damocles [sic.] was dressed in the richest garments, laid on the softest couch before the *richest* meal, and the servants were told to obey his every wish. This pleased Damocles greatly. He laughed and sang, ate and drank, and was enjoying himself most thoroughly.

By chance he idly gazed up at the ceiling, and [there] saw a...sword hanging by a single [horse-tail] hair directly over his head. [At the sight of it h]e grew pale with terror, the laughter died on his lips, and, as soon as he could move, he sprang from the couch...

Dionysius with pretended surprise urged him to go back to his [throne]; but Damocles refused to do so, and pointed to the sword with a trembling hand. Then the tyrant told him that a person always haunted by fear can never be truly happy - an explanation which Damocles readily understood.

Since then, whenever a seemingly happy and prosperous person is threatened by a hidden danger, it has been usual to compare him to Damocles, and to say that a sword is hanging over his head.'[\[n.2\]](#)

You probably, I imagine, have heard this tale before - or something like it, and I know that I've certainly alluded to it (in a previous sermon).

It too is also a kind of parable - or at least it is treated as such. And it resonates with that image of God-the-farmer, standing over *His* field, which is the universe, waiting for the opportune time to bring the judgment that our sinfulness has invited; *deserves*.

And I don't mention this to frighten anybody, *truly* - because there is nothing, in

fact, for *us* to fear: not when you consider the staggering, *always* surprising graciousness of God and His gift of eternal life by faithfulness to His Son; true *Christians*, according to Paul, *won't* be judged, and I quote: 'Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters?', [1 Cor. 6:3].

But knowing what the sickle represents - and how it will divide humanity - should shift, *drastically*, your perception of those you know and encounter.

In *Samuel*, we heard how the prophet, "grieved" over his role in making Saul a king of Israel [15:35], goes on a journey to find a replacement, and meets the eight sons of Jesse who, it is implied, are tall and muscular and very impressive; but God chose the youngest and *least* accomplished, David.

And why?

Because He had a different view of things than Samuel could see, [1 Sam. 16:7].

He saw a *larger* picture - 'of things seen and unseen', (to quote our Creed).

And we need to train ourselves to do likewise.

To see our neighbours and our children and our colleagues *not* just in worldly *material* terms, but as spiritual creatures who will also face the same "sickle" that we do. As men and women with an eternal life *somewhere*.

And will those we know and love and meet in the street be 'ripe' 'grain' on that unknown [Mt. 24:36] day of harvest?

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Burge, Gary M.; Cohick, Lynn H. and Green, Gene L. (2009), *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within its Cultural Contexts*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 170.
2. Guerber, H. A. (1896), *The Story of the Greeks*, New York, N. Y.; Cincinnati, O. H.: American Book Company, 208-210. (My italics.)