

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 13 June 2021
11.00am Katherine Fox

Allowing the commonplace to grow wild: what might it look like when everything is a new creation and we no longer see things from a human perspective

Introduction

This week my job has forced me to admit to myself that I split the world into two types of people.

There are those who do their job well, answering emails promptly, delivering the projects they are supposed to deliver, holding meetings to consult properly all those affected, sticking to established practice and procedure and building on it.

And there are those who see the potential for their role to be much more than that. Who do things a bit more creatively. Who think beyond how it's always been done. Who don't mind breaking the odd rule or skipping the odd bit of progress. Who have an inbox full of unanswered emails but somehow manage to pull off something that will make everyone go 'wow'.

The second group have taken the first part of the saying from the book of Proverbs to heart: where there is no vision, the people perish. While the first group put more emphasis on the second part of that saying: but he that keepeth the law, how happy is he.

It came up because I'm conducting a review of the work I've been leading. We've managed to pull off a lot that has made people go 'wow'. It's now time to make that way of working the default: so it becomes the projects people are supposed to deliver, the established practice and procedure that can be built on. One colleague suggested the problem was "some people just lack imagination". I think you can guess which category we both put ourselves in and which category we thought was best.

Inevitably, then, I first saw in the parable of the mustard seed an endorsement of the visionary people rather than those happy keeping the law and established practice. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised neither the visionary nor those happy keeping the law were fulfilling the parable of the mustard seed. Let me explain.

In the times and places this story was told and then recorded, the mustard seed was common. And while some of us may have mustard seeds tucked away with our herbs and spices, probably most of us have not seen what a mustard plant looks like. So let's take something similar that's a little more familiar. For me that's rosemary, sage and mint. In London these are fairly commonplace ingredients and plants. At this time of year they are the greatest of shrubs in my garden. The sage has taken over most of the herb bed so nothing else can be seen, the bees busy in its abundant purple flowers. The rosemary isn't far behind, while the mint insists on growing in the cracks in the path so every day it gets run over by my bike releasing a minty aroma.

The greatest of shrubs in my garden. But unlike the shrub in Mark's gospel, no bird will attempt to land in them, as if they did the plants would get squashed or bend and the bird deposited on the ground. And that's the point. No matter how much we follow established procedure to nurture these shrubs, or try something a bit more creative, they will be good shrubs and not the greatest.

Our reading from 2 Corinthians helps explain what's going on. We regard everything from a human point of view. Both visionaries and happy followers of established practice. We regard outward appearances, or as we might call them outputs and measures of success. We should no longer regard anything from this human point of view. An imaginative, entrepreneurial approach is not enough where the vision is limited

by a human, not Godly, perspective. Following established practice is not enough where the practice is limited by a human, not Godly, approach.

How then, to walk by faith; by God's viewpoint not our own?

Firstly, changing our perspective on our sowing

Perhaps we have taken the parables of sowing seeds a little too seriously in how we live our lives.

We might have a neat plot where we sow seeds relating to church: a church growth strategy, roles we fulfil that are the day to day expression of tending to our church.

We might have another neat plot that is about our personal growth: the things we do to grow in our faith and grow closer to God, perhaps discussion groups, attending worship, reading, quiet time, organised activities, getting out into nature.

We might have another neat plot that is about growth towards justice and peace: campaigning, giving money, volunteering at projects, cutting our carbon footprint.

We might have another neat plot that is about serving: looking out for people we know who need support, keeping in touch with family and friends.

A very human way to grow. But will these commonplace things get from mustard seed to unbalanced, overgrown, disproportionate shrubs? Are we judging them on outward appearance, rather than looking at the heart of each activity? Or can we stop regarding these seeds we sow from a human point of view to enable everything we do to become new?

I think the last year gives us some clues as to what this looks like. Rather than a neat plot where we go to church and engage in church activities, we've undertaken them wherever we are, across continents and time zones.

What we might call work has no longer has a clearly demarcated start and end time – done when the baby is sleeping, home schooling has finished, juggled around when the supermarket queue is shortest, when the people are free, when transport is quietest, when there is a gap because someone is sick we have to step into or when we can't take part because we can't go out for ten days.

We're never quite off duty from it any longer. That can have massive negative impacts. But perhaps it can also help us see things more from God's perspective, who is also never off duty. God who is always present, always engaged, not using neat categories.

Giles reminded us at an evening service recently of MAYC London weekend, when tens of thousands of young Methodists turned London green and yellow. Many of us shared stories of the profound impact it had on our faith and personal growth, and the strength we took from being among so many young Christians. What I didn't know, until Giles said, was that the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs was set up in the aftermath of the Second World War to help children make up their lost childhoods. Their very own Catch-up Czar. Something small and commonplace that couldn't be kept in a neat plot, over growing to be a great shrub as our own personal stories attested.

Secondly, making sure we've had moments when we feel like Jacob and Samuel

How did Jacob and Samuel feel as each son was presented, and their certainty that this son must be the one was proven wrong? I suspect they felt awkward. Their awkwardness telling them not to judge on outward signs like confidence, noble appearance and stature, but to look inwards.

To sow and tend the commonplace so it becomes unbalanced, overgrown and disproportionate we need to feel awkward. We need to go through all the obvious options that look right on the outside and dismiss them. I'd go as far as to say if we don't feel awkward at all in how we carry out the activities we call sowing and tending, then we are probably not doing it right.

I caught part of Thought for the Day recently where the speaker described his awkwardness at leading a walking meditation group and having to push one participant in her wheelchair. He apologised to her that she couldn't fully participate in this meditation focused on walking. She dismissed his concerns, saying that being pushed gave her much more time to focus on what was going on around her. This was something he drew on as he faced a year of long COVID; he did not want to dismiss how tough it had been but during that time remembered what he learnt on that occasion.

Thirdly, everything is becoming new

Perhaps it is the song, perhaps it is the subtly different translations or perhaps I just didn't read properly to the end of the sentence. But I'd missed the significance of the final verse we heard read from Corinthians. It is not about one person becoming a new creation, as the song says "I am a new creation", or as some translations say "he is a new creation" rather than "there is a new creation" as we heard this morning. The rest of the verse makes it clear: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.

This is where sowing and tending so we produce unbalanced, overgrown, disproportionate shrubs comes in. Seeing not through human eyes but through God's eyes. When we walk by faith in God rather than by our own sight everything is in scope for becoming new.

During the recent intensification of the conflict in Gaza I heard member of the Parents Circle interviewed. As those who joined the talk at Hinde Street from them a few years ago will remember, this is an organisation that brings together Israeli and Palestinian parents whose children have been killed in the conflict there. Through reconciliation they are try to build a future where no more parents are bereaved. One asked what would happen if everyone who had been bereaved in the world, including from COVID-19, turned that grief into action and reconciliation.

That makes the challenge to see not through human eyes quite personal. Members of our congregation here have died of COVID-19 over the last year. That makes everyone here bereaved. The challenge then is for us all: how to turn our grief into action. Grief can feel like a violent wind buffeting us constantly; perhaps this is what it meant when we read that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, came among the people like a violent wind.

How to see the common place things around us, the herbs and spices at the backs of our cupboards, as God sees them? How to sow them and tend them through God's eyes so that they end up the greatest, beyond what anyone human thought possible? A new creation where everything has become new.