

Sunday 16 June 2024, 3rd Sunday of Trinity,

Mark 4.26-34

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

We live in a world of conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Just the other day, I saw advertised on a London bus an event to be held at the Excel by a so-called 'evangelist' known for involvement in pyramid schemes, claims that Hollywood stars drink the blood of children, and his belief that covid was engineered as a form of population control. Conspiracy theories like these, often peddled by people who also peddle worthless health supplements and tacky 'merch', are leapt on by those who don't want to confront the more complex social issues at play in our globalised world. It is much easier to point the finger at a mysterious cabal of grey-suits than it is to recognise one's own complicity in the workings of a fallen world. It is easier to blame than to repent when the real 'conspiracy' is one in which we all play a role, even if unwillingly.

Conspiracy-theorists are known not to respond to facts. About this time last year, journalist Marianna Spring put out a series of podcasts titled 'Marianna in Conspiracyland' in which she delved deep into the conspiracy-theory movement, spoke to some of its chief protagonists in Britain, and pondered why people fall into conspiracy theory as an explanation for what's going on in the world around them. The series is still available on BBC Sounds and I commend it to you. What Marianna discovered is that behind all conspiracy talk is a profound feeling of powerlessness and separation. We see wrong and we cannot change it and rather than recognise ourselves and the cultures in which we live as partly to blame, we create a bogeyman, a scapegoat who embodies our fears. We externalise instead of reflecting. It is always easier to blame than to repent.

This is why I find Jesus' parables in today's Gospel reading so comforting. I often feel powerless. Whilst I don't believe Hollywood stars drink the blood of children, I do recognise that the culture of Hollywood is not the finest exemplar of true religion and virtue. Though I do not believe covid was created to control population growth, I do see that the easy spread of global contagion and the seeming lack of governmental capacity to cope on so many levels with our increasingly globalised world is dangerous. What can I do? And what can I do, knowing that I have a Netflix subscription and like going on holiday to the Continent? I am complicit in the very problems I criticise. But what does Jesus say to his disciples? *The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.* The kingdom of God, he says, grows as it grows; its growth is mysterious and we get up in the morning and we go to bed and it has grown and we have neither seen it nor been responsible for its growth. I am not in control of that kingdom. And though I am complicit in the growth of a world I do not always like, the kingdom grows no matter what I do. My complicity in flawed systems cannot stop its growth and my ignorance of its growth does not blunt its impact.

And then this, wonder of wonders: *When it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.* This kingdom which

grows without my aid provides branches for everyone to sit on. The goodness of God's kingdom gets everywhere. Like some great global conspiracy it springs up in unexpected places; everywhere you look, there is the kingdom peeping through. And not only peeping through, but bearing us up. You see, I give myself away by calling the kingdom a conspiracy, because there is a mysterious force at work in the world and it isn't a shadowy cabal of unelected officials, a faceless Brussels bureaucracy, or an occult organisation with secret handshakes. Conspiracy theory is a way of trying to explain 'what's really going on'; and, according to Jesus, what's really going on all over the world is the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God- which transforms hearts and minds- this kingdom springs up overnight and it pushes its tendrils through even the stoniest wills like mine which are still cooperating with the sins that beset the world. And it grows until we restless little birds can find shelter in its sturdy boughs.

And the most miraculous thing about this kingdom is that even those who don't want it or who don't recognise it find that they are a part of it. Everywhere the truth of Jesus Christ goes, the kingdom springs up. It springs up in so many unexpected places. It springs up in a young woman of North-African origin I spoke with recently who started wearing a cross so the men in her neighbourhood would stop mistreating her, but who found in wearing that cross a real and growing relationship with Jesus who could save only her body but her soul. The kingdom gets everywhere and there's nothing we can do to stop it. The powerlessness and separation that drives men and women into Conspiracyland has one antidote and one only: the kingdom they do not yet realise they are already living in. That kingdom, whose most visible earthly manifestation is the Church, has more than enough room in its branches for nesting in. If you have been so fortunate as to nest in God's kingdom, to rest in God's great tree of a kingdom, to watch it spread its tendrils of mercy and love through your life, and to see it grow even when you fail and fail to repent, even while you are still complicit in this global world's mess, tell others about it. Jesus spoke to everyone in parables and he explained them to his disciples. Perhaps Jesus has spoken to you as his disciple today. If so, go and tell someone else what you have heard and learned. There is room for so many more tired, restless birds to make their nest. Amen.