

Weeds Overgrowing a Crumbling Empire

A sermon on Mark 4:26-34 by Nathan Nettleton, 13 June 2021

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Message

The culture of God rises in defiance of the empires of this world, but it will look more like an annoying outbreak of self-sown, invasive weeds than an alternative empire.

Sermon

Many of us have been horrified this past week by the images of three-year-old Tharniccaa Murugappan lying in pain and distress in the Perth Children's Hospital while the government refused to allow her family to travel to Perth with her from the Christmas Island Detention Centre where they have been held for the last three years.

This, of course, is just the latest in a long list of atrocities against this family of asylum seekers. They were living as happy and valued members of the community in small town Biloela in central Queensland when Australian Border Force officials dragged them off and placed them in custody. Central Queensland has never been a stronghold of bleeding-heart lefties, but the townsfolk have continued to campaign to bring the family home to Biloela.



The atrocities against the Murugappan family are just the visible tip of a very large iceberg of Australia's atrocities against asylum seekers. The combination of cute kids and an otherwise conservative Aussie town championing their cause has made them far more visible and recognisable than the hundreds of other asylum seekers being held in concentration camps by our nation.

Their visibility has made them icons of the bigger picture, and unfortunately for them, that makes the heartless powerbrokers who could change this all the more determined not to do so. As Attorney-General Michaelia Cash put it a few days ago, the government's "very, very tough stance on asylum seekers" ... "is the right stance because of *the consequences of blinking*."

Now to be fair, Michaelia Cash was specifically referring to "the consequences of blinking" in a staring match between Australian border protection and the profiteering people smugglers. But I wonder whether her fear of blinking also uncovers something else? I suspect that the government thinks that it can't afford to blink as it attempts to stare down the growing discontent over this within the Australian community. It can't afford to blink because it has built too much of its electoral support on this "very, very tough stance" to risk allowing the doubts and questions to get off the leash.

That's the way empires maintain their power. Even as they crumble, they desperately try to maintain an unblinking glare that projects power and intimidation against all questions, doubts and threats. "Don't ask questions, or you'll undermine our capacity to keep you safe," they say.

Last Sunday, in the part of our gospel reading before the bit I preached on, we heard Jesus talking about the satan's house being divided against itself. The "satan", which in Hebrew means the accuser or prosecutor, maintains power through accusing and dividing and turning us against each other, or more specifically against "the other", the one who is not us, and who is accused of being a threat to us, and who we must therefore unblinkingly reject and force out from our midst.

Human cultures and their empires are built on this practice. We define our borders and our boundaries carefully and defend them murderously. We construct and reinforce our communal identity and unity over against those we reject and refuse to allow in.

But we live in an era when it is all starting to fall apart, and thank God. Too many of us have begun to see that the whole thing is a satanic lie. Instant media allows us to see the faces of our child victims as they lie in pain in a hospital bed, and too many of us begin to feel their pain and dream that perhaps we could be better than this. Too many of us have seen the evidence of the massacres on which this nation was built and the atrocities by which it is being maintained. Too many of us are asking dangerous questions. The house of cards is collapsing, but the power brokers of empire refuse to blink lest even more of us begin to see a little shoot of compassion break through the cracks and recognise it as a sign that the satan's house is finally crumbling.

In the face of all this comes today's gospel reading which follows on directly from last week's. This time we hear Jesus telling two seemingly innocuous, but actually quite subversive and dangerous parables. So long as we hear these parables as nothing more than Sunday School illustrations promising that our churches might grow like the little seed on the cotton wool in the cup, the rulers of empire can rest easy. But they do not want us to hear and understand what Jesus is saying the way his first hearers heard him. Back then, they had to crucify him to try to shut him up. Not that that went well for them!

The first clue that these parables are a lot more explosive than the Sunday School seed in a cup is that Jesus says they are both about the kingdom of God. We know what the Roman empire made of that language, because it was the main focus of Pilate's interrogation of Jesus. "We have an empire to maintain here, so what's this about growing a new kingdom? No one can serve two empires, and we want loyal subjects, so what's this kingdom you're encouraging people to align themselves with? We have ways of dealing with upstart kingdoms."

The first parable is one that Jesus might have been able to get away with telling in front of Pilate. It is perhaps a little like his line about "my kingdom is not of this world." But he's not telling it to Pilate. He's telling it to us, to people who are sick of being controlled by empire and who would want to challenge it if only we believed it was possible and knew how.

"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 earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. Eventually the grain is ripe and the harvest has come."

So the kingdom of God is not at all like the empire. Empires are built by aggressive rulers who organise and plan and take control. Empires are maintained by constant vigilance, by

watching for spot fires of subversion and stomping them out before they can take hold. But the kingdom of God does not come that way.

Jesus is speaking here to those who want to overthrow the empire by planning and building their own empire. They imagine that the Messiah will come with sword in hand and armies in train to drive out the Romans and establish the kingdom of God, which in their minds looks remarkably similar to the empire except that it's our own empire, not theirs.

There were plenty of groups who didn't believe in waiting for God to act, but who thought they could usher in God's kingdom on the strength of their own efforts. The Zealots thought they could do it by a violent terrorist campaign against the Romans. The Pharisees thought that if they could command perfect obedience to God's law, then the conquering messiah would appear. And there were, and still are, various apocalyptic cults who thought that if they could crack the codes of the ancient prophecies and prepare for the end, it would come on their say so.

To all these, Jesus says that the kingdom is not an alternative empire that you can plan for, construct and maintain by your own efforts or ingenuity. That's the way empires work, but this is something different, something more organic. It's not so much an administration as a culture that grows and spreads. Sure you can sow the seeds, but you can't engineer their growth. You can barely even understand their growth. They'll grow when they're ready, not when you decide. We can co-operate with the processes of what God is doing, but we can't take charge of them.

We know a fair bit about this in this church at present. We appear to be on the cusp of a whole new era of significantly changed patterns of church life. And how much did we prepare for that? Who was carefully planning all this out 18 months ago? Not a single one of us! A pandemic struck unexpectedly and the green shoots of prayer and community life that came up through the cracks of what we thought was just a temporary emergency response took us all completely by surprise and made a mockery of our delusions about being able to analyse and strategise our way into a new church future. The seed sprouts and grows and the sower knows not how.

Then comes the second parable, the one about the mustard seed that grows into a big bush for the birds to come and shelter in. To our ears it sounds a bit similar to the first one, but it becomes deeply subversive when you hear it the way Jesus's first hearers heard it, as a twist on one of their best known and favourite stories.

The favourite story is found in the prophet Ezekiel (17:22-24) and it comes in response to a whole diatribe about kings of Israel betraying their people by seeking to cosy up to the imperial powers of Egypt and Babylon. The story goes like this:

“Thus says the Lord God:

I will take a sprig from the top of a giant cedar tree,
and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain in Israel.
I will plant it, in order that it may become a noble cedar,
producing branches and bearing fruit,
and in the shade of its branches every kind of bird will find shelter.”

And then it finishes with the direct slap to the empires of the day:

“All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.
I bring the big tree crashing down,
and I grow the little tree into a great tree.”

The ordinary Hebrew people knew and loved this story with its promise that God would cut down the arrogant empires that had lorded it over them for so long and raise up little Israel to be a great towering cedar of an empire of their own. So this story is already a challenge to empire before Jesus gets to it. That’s a given.

But now Jesus is riffing on this story. He’s playing with it in ways that are not only dangerous in the eyes of empire, but perhaps equally unpopular with those who liked to imagine themselves as the next powerful empire. Because when Jesus tells the story, we are no longer promised that we will grow into a giant cedar on a lofty mountain top. Instead says Jesus, the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed which is planted and grows into the greatest of all – wait for it – the greatest of all ... shrubs! And Jesus doesn’t just refer generically to any shrub, he names it as the mustard bush, which was and still is an invasive weed in those parts.

That’s pretty damn disappointing if you had your heart set on becoming the giant cedar of the original story. People can get themselves thrown off cliffs for messing with the sacred stories like that. But for those who have ears to hear, this strange new telling of the story is perhaps even a bigger threat to the pretensions of an empire that is crumbling under the weight of its own arrogance and brutality.

Let’s bring it back home to Australia and see if you can see what I mean. Australia doesn’t pretend to be the biggest tree on the mountain, but as empires go, it regards itself as a tree of significance. And the kind of threats it understands and is prepared to stand up to are bigger more aggressive trees that might want to push it off the mountain. It is most worried about China, but it keeps a cautious eye on Indonesia too.

But what if instead of cultural change coming as a giant intimidating power, it comes as an invasive weed? Even when you try to concrete everything over, weeds have a way of forcing open a crack and sticking their heads up. What if invasive little shoots of compassion started coming through the cracks in the hardened hearts of empire that think that it makes more political sense to traumatise a three year old than it does to risk the perception of blinking?

What if the kingdom, the culture of God, comes as scrappy shoots of love and hospitality that force open cracks in the facade of fear that slams closed our borders to those fleeing violence and poverty? What if the culture of God comes as creeping weeds of repentance and honesty and generosity that grow all over the crumbling ruins of an empire built on the massacre and dispossession of indigenous peoples and a white Australia policy?

Suddenly it is starting to sound a lot like dangerous gospel, like good news that breaks through where you least expect it and begins giving birth to a whole new culture. When that happens, it doesn’t only subvert the empires. It usually begins to subvert our carefully managed and maintained lives too. Because most of us are haunted by a nagging awareness that we have purchased our place of shelter to nest in the branches of empire at the price of our silence over the brutal treatment of three year old Tharnicaa and her family, and we have coped with

that by turning away our faces and living polite and orderly and careful lives. So our instinct, when the invasive weeds of the culture of God start popping up will be to try to root them out in order to keep things nice and neat the way we had planned them and the way empire had rewarded us for living them.

But when the weeds of the culture of God start breaking through, they are impossible to tame. They won't behave like flowers that grow only where we want them. As this culture takes hold, we're either going to burst to life with it, or we are going to be buried in the rubble of empire as the weeds of the new culture of life grow over us.

It doesn't matter whether you are looking at the trajectory of your own life, or at what can be done about human rights abuses in our own nation, or at how the changes in our own church life might play out, don't make the mistake of craning your neck to try to make out which is the biggest and best tree on the mountain. The new culture of love and hope and joy and generosity that we all hunger for deep in our guts is not going to be found up there in the lofty heights. Instead it is coming up like an unruly weed through the cracks in the pavement at your feet, and no empire can stop its spread, however many times it seeks to crush it or concrete it over.

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.” May his parables continue to disturb us and awaken us to God's love and life and all it means for our world.