**Mark 4:26-29**

**God is in control**

When we go through times of trouble and distress, we need to know that God is in control. When we look at the news each day and see the heartache across the nations, we need to know that God is in control. When life is feeling like a bind; the drudgery of just grinding it out, we need to know that God is in control, When we experience deep moments of change in our lives, we need to know where our security is, what we can rely on…

 We need to know that God is in control.

 Ultimately, that is the message of the Kingdom of God.

 The Kingdom of God is not a place; it’s not some physical realm existing beyond the clouds: the Kingdom of God is a rule, it’s a sovereignty, it’s an authority, it’s the reality that God is in control.

 Right at the beginning of his ministry, recorded in Mark 1:15, Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand”. Jesus was the sign, the symbol, the embodiment of God being in control.

 We need to know that God is in control, and so we need the Kingdom of God.

 And throughout his ministry, Jesus gave little bits of teaching to help us get something of a grasp of what the Kingdom of God is like. He couldn’t describe it, of course: how can you describe the control, the rule of God? It is only evidenced in our lives, in his world, and so Jesus gave little pictures to help us understand so that we can better interpret our experience.

 And these pictures, what are sometimes called parables, seem very easy to understand, very straightforward and simple. And, in a sense, they are. But sometimes we think that they are so simple, that we don’t really listen to them. We may have heard them so often that we think we know what they are saying. Sometimes we can be looking so intently at something that we miss what is really going on. What is really there? What do we really need to see in these simple parables of Jesus about the Kingdom of God? And having seen what’s there, what can we learn for our own lives?

 Let’s have a look at the parable we’ve just heard read to us:

 “And Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is as if a man should cast seed on the ground then sleep and rise night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how. Without visible cause the earth produces a crop; first the blade, then the head, then the whole grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest is ready.”

 So, what is this parable about?

 Is it about the farmer? And if so, who is the farmer? Well, I don’t think it is about the farmer, really. We are not told much about him and the way Mark phrases the story, the farmer is fairly remote from the action. First, we are told that he casts the seed and the word Mark uses for ‘cast’ is a sort of careless tossing of the seed - a random chucking about - so we are not to learn too much from the farmer in terms of careful planting activity. And then we are not told much else about the farmer’s activity: he just sleeps and rises and he seems pretty ignorant about the whole process of growth anyway. Jesus says, “The seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how”. Right at the end, he harvests what has grown - but his input into the process has been pretty minimal.

 So I don’t think this is about the farmer and we would be hard-pressed to read into this that the farmer is God; if he is, then he seems pretty remote and detached from the whole process and it certainly doesn’t sound like a God who is in control!

 So if it’s not about the farmer, it must be about the seed. And, of course, that is the comparison with the Kingdom of God: not that the farmer is like the King, our God, but that the seed is like the Kingdom. And if we look at it like this, we learn four important things from which we can draw encouragement

 The first is that…

**1. The Kingdom of God is to be found in the ordinary and mundane things of life**

We come back to this idea pretty regularly, so I don’t want to labour the point too much again. But it is such a crucial spiritual principle that we are right to re-visit it again. The Kingdom of God is worked out in the ordinary things of life.

 When you look at this story, note the rhythm, the notion of cycle: sleep and rise, night and day, sprout and grow…

 The Kingdom of God is happening as the farmer goes about his ordinary life. He sleeps and rises, night and day; there’s a rhythm here – a cycle of life. There is no comment made about him actually impacting the growing process at all. No mention is made of him tilling the ground, or watering the plants. No mention is made of him pulling weeds or protecting his crop from the elements. He just sleeps and rises, night and day…and without any interference on his part, the seed sprouts and grows…

 You see, God is in control: this is his Kingdom. God is sovereign over all.

 And when we hit difficult times in our lives, or we see others around us suffering, or when we are facing times of change, perhaps chaos in our world, the temptation is for us to try to fix things, to control things. We want to make it right, we want to hurry up the process, and bring things to a proper and happy conclusion.

 But you and I know that, often in life, we can’t fix things.

 But just because we can’t fix a situation, it doesn’t mean that it is out of control. It just means that it is out of *our* control - and that is something very different indeed…

 Sometimes, we find ourselves completely impotent in life to make a difference: the best we can do is sleep and rise; we have nothing else to offer. And, you know, that’s OK: our inability to control does not mean that the Kingdom of God is not present. It is present still; sprouting and growing without any help from you or me…

 God is in control.

**2. We don’t need to understand the process**

Now, this is very hard for me to hear, because I like to understand all that is happening in my life. I like strategies, I like plans, I like to know how I will get from A to B. And I constantly battle with this in my own spiritual life because I like to have a firm understanding of where God is taking me and what I need to do to get there. Perhaps some of you are the same.

 But the farmer in our story is not like that. Jesus simply says, “The seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how.”

 Now if I were that farmer, I would be having sleepless nights. I would have all sorts of anxieties going through my head, trying to work out what the process of growth actually is and how I can influence it for the better. But our farmer isn’t like that: he doesn’t seem to lose any sleep at all because he just trusts the process of growth; he doesn’t know how but he knows it will happen. And again, this comes back to control, doesn’t it? We can only control something if we know how it works…

 But we are not in control.

 God is in control.

 We can look at our lives, our current struggles, our current anxieties, and say, “Lord, where on earth are you in all this mess?” “I don’t get it. I don’t get you, God. I do not understand the process.” And of course, we are not alone in thinking that. What else was going through Jesus’ mind on the cross when he said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He didn’t understand the process and, as a result, he felt forsaken.

 But he wasn’t forsaken.

 God was in control.

 And even though you may not understand the process right now, you are not forsaken.

 God is in control.

 God is in control. And that brings us to our third point, which is simply this:

**3. The Kingdom of God will grow regardless, because it is destined to**

There are times in my life when I feel guilty that I am impeding the work of God. I get in the way of God, I do not create the right conditions for his Kingdom to flourish. If only I was a better preacher, if only I was a better Pastor. If only I was more loving and more kind and more compassionate, then the Kingdom of God would grow. If only I was a better father or a more loyal friend , then I could help the Kingdom of God to come in the lives of others.

 But I am weak and frail and fallible. I make big mistakes in my ministry. I am not the World’s Greatest Vicar, as you have all come to realise by now!

 And all that brings levels of guilt that if I could create the right conditions, the Kingdom of God would grow bigger and faster and better. But that is a false guilt for me, and a false guilt for you if you feel the same way, because the truth is that the Kingdom of God will grow regardless of us - simply because it is destined to.

 God is in control.

 Look at what this parable of Jesus *does not* say: No mention of the rain watering the seed. No mention of the wind cross-pollinating it. No mention of the sun giving it warmth or energy. No mention of conditions for growth at all. Verse 28 simply says, “Without visible cause, the earth produces a crop”. The seed is destined to grow. The Kingdom is destined to come in your life.

 God is in control.

 The truth is, we are all frail and we all fail. But your frailty and your failings will not be a barrier to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

 God is in control.

 He is sovereign over your life and mine. He is sovereign over the world and where his Kingdom is destined to break through, there it will break through.

 You have nothing to fear, nothing to feel anxious about, nothing to feel guilty about, because God is in control.

 And because God is in control, we rejoice in the fourth and final lesson from this parable.

**4. There is an end game**

When we go through times of suffering, we wonder where it will all end. When our lives are lost in a cloud of confusion, we wonder where it is heading. We can’t see the point, we can’t find a purpose.

 But God is in control.

 And in this parable, we learn that there is an end game, verse 29: “But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest is ready.” Not when the farmer gives the go ahead, not when the farmer understands the process - but when the crop permits…Then, and only then, the farmer takes his sickle and harvests the crop

 That is the end game; the seed has been sown and has grown for a purpose: the harvest. And in the same way, the Kingdom of God, the sovereign rule of God, has been sown in your life and has grown in your life and, when the crop permits, it will be harvested.

 In Romans 8:28, Paul writes, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.” That doesn’t mean that all things are good. It doesn’t even mean that God is in all things or that we need to find God in all things. Sometimes life is just cruel and dishes up a raw deal for us. God is not in the raw deal.

 But what God promises through Paul in Romans is that all the cruel experiences, all the pain, all the hurt, all the joys, all the celebrations, all the unknowns and unfathomables, will one day be gathered up together and will be brought together for our good. That is the end game: that is the harvest of the Kingdom.

 Even in the trials and sufferings of life, God is in control.

 God can take the darkness and turn it into light – because he is in control.

 God can take weakness and turn it into strength – because he is in control.

 God can take death and turn it into life – because he is in control.

 God can take the harrows of hell and transform them into the glories of heaven.

 Because God is in control.

 One day, he will put in the sickle and he will reap the harvest because God is in control.

So what is this Kingdom of God of which Jesus speaks?

 It is not a place; it is an experience – it is a rule. It is the sovereignty of God in our lives; the sovereignty of God over even the most trying of circumstances that we face.

 The Kingdom of God has drawn near – because God is in control.

 We experience the Kingdom in the ordinariness of life; even in the midst of our fears and anxieties.

 We experience the Kingdom often without understanding the process.

 We experience the Kingdom despite our weakness and failings, because it is our destiny to do so.

 We experience the Kingdom as the fulfilment of God’s plan for our lives.

We experience the Kingdom - because God is in control.