

God's Kingdom grows in mysterious, miraculous ways. Ancient people knew nothing about the power which transformed a seed into a plant, a shoot into one with a full-ear of grain.

They had no time-lapse photography but they did have an awe in the face of the natural world. The farmer would sow the grain and then wait. The rain would come and the farmer would get up night and day and watch the growth and then when the harvest came would reap what had been sown, yes the farmer sowed the grain and would reap it, but would also give thanks to God who gave the growth. And it was this image which Jesus used to speak about the growth of his people, the Church.

God's Kingdom comes as a tiny seed, as small as the mustard seed, but when planted and tended would grow into the greatest of plants and produce grain fit to be harvested. Similarly God's Word planted and tended would grow into saving faith.

People would come to know and love the Lord not so much by techniques and programs, not by gimmicks, but by authentic witness and sharing and caring in a relationship.

Caring is an interesting concept and word. It comes from *kara*, the Greek word meaning to "cry out." To care means to "cry out" with those who are sick, confused, lonely, isolated, forgotten, with those who are suspicious of organised religion, those who fear commitment and those in mid-life crisis and impending retirement and older people who feel redundant and left behind.

Henri Nouwen, the theologian and great spiritual leader, has written that we care, "to enter the world of those who are broken and powerless and to establish there a fellowship of the weak; to care is to embrace affectionately those who are touched by hostile hands, to listen attentively to those whose words are only heard by greedy ears and to speak gently with those who are used to harsh orders and impatient requests; to be present to those who suffer and to stay present when nothing can be done to change their situation."

God's Kingdom comes in mysterious and wonderful ways, like a seed that miraculously grows day and night until the grain is ready to be harvested. It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds that can produce something similar to a mustard tree where the birds will make their nests in the shade.

It is hard, sometimes, for us to understand that our task is to sow, to water and to watch and wait for the harvest. We are activists in a society that rewards doing rather than thinking and talking and being.

We quickly look to the bottom line. We want success in business, family, schools and in our churches. We are uncomfortable with anything that does not show clear results. But God's Kingdom is not quantifiable. It cannot be measured by human tools.

The parables of Jesus are clear that which human beings can witness to others, can preach and teach the Gospel, can be present caring for others, it is really God's Spirit which works in human hearts to build faith. We may plant and water and watch but it is God who gives the growth.

That's a word which we all need to hear. The call is to preach God's Word, to administer the sacraments, to teach, to challenge and care for God's people, but it is easy to get sidetracked by meetings and programs and paperwork. Our neighbours and we ourselves, compare our congregations to those that are growing and expanding in programs, staff, building space. Like other people, ministers want to see results and huge growth "soul care," may not demonstrate any great paper results.

Nouwen continues, "What we want is to bring about changes, to make a visible difference. To be a professional means to master the skills with which we can repair what is broken, put together what has fallen apart, reunite what is disjoined, restore what is decayed and heal what is ill.

In short, to be a professional means to be someone who cures rather than cares. Doctors are considered good doctors when their patients who entered a hospital on a stretcher can leave on their own feet. Psychologists are called competent when their clients feel less confused after treatment than before. Social workers are seen as capable when their interventions make a difference in the life of the community.

Also ministers are praised according to the successes of their programs and projects." He continues, "but slowly, imperceptibly, maybe, we have made our sense of "self" dependent not on who we are, but on what we do; not on our inner strength but on the results of our word, not our personal integrity but on the praise or blame of our environment, we have become so oriented toward success that we have become what others make of us, we have sold our soul to the world."

A colleague of mine told me recently that he was leaving the ministry. He is very likeable, warm, friendly who has tried his best to serve God and the people in his charge. What prompted him to leave Christian service is just this

emphasis on results. His congregation has not grown even though he worked very hard just to maintain it. He is isolated from other clergy and feels ignored by the church authorities.

His story is not unusual, in fact may even be rather typical. Thirty years ago ministers were some of the healthiest people, but no longer. They show all the diseases of stress that people in business, medicine, education and the arts do.

Ministers are not immune from depression or addiction. When the institutional churches have been in decline and increasingly rapid decline but often unrecognised by those who compare and blame, then it should not surprise us that clergy morale is so low, clergy conduct often upsetting and congregations in turmoil.

We have forgotten that it is God who works the miracle of growth. It is up to us to plant, tend and watch. We need to be clear that we care about people and their relationship to Christ, not institutional maintenance. Growth is God's miracle, not our work.

We may not understand what the parables tell us—Jesus' hearers had the same problem. The parables tell us to value people for who they are, not what they have done or what they possess. In fact the parables teach us to value what is insignificant, small, forgotten the more surprise when the tiniest mustard seed grows into the largest of trees.

When the Emperor Valerian was persecuting the Church, he demanded that it hand over its treasures. St Lawrence, the Deacon, gave away the church wealth to the poor and brought the poor people of Rome, its old people, the lame and sick and widowed to the emperor.

These, he said, were the treasures of the Church. It is our children, our teenagers, our twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, our mid-life troubled, our aged, our infirm, our minorities, our powerless, the financially strapped, our handicapped, these are people important to God.

They like we need to be told over and over again of God's love, God loves them and accepts them and values them. It is in people like this who have come to know Jesus Christ, that the seed is planted, watered and grows until the harvest. God gives the growth. All we can do is sow and water, sleep and rise night and day and wait for God. Amen