

A little religion goes a long way (Luke 13: 19-21)

It was the end of a busy Sunday, on my way home I bumped into Lisette, one of my many non-churchgoing parishioners. I must have looked fragile for she said with some concern, *How are you, Vicar?*

How am I? I exclaimed, *I've preached three sermons, read six lessons, sung twelve hymns, and said I don't know how many prayers. How am I? I've had enough religion to last me the rest of my life.* A year or two later, at the baptism of her grandson, she introduced me as, *This is our Vicar, he doesn't like religion.* Well, she must have caught me on a bad day, but it's true that the older I get the more I feel that a little religion goes a long way.

But least you are thinking of reporting me to the bishop, I want to add that I think Jesus would have agreed with me. If we had continued our gospel this morning for the two more verses which is the logical finish to the section we would have read, *What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made their nests in it. It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.* Jesus tells us that we only need a little faith, not bucketfuls of it. An amount so tiny that if you placed it on the palm of your hand you would hardly notice it, *like a grain of mustard seed, he said - the smallest of all seeds.*

Do you see that mountain? he once asked, *If you had only a fragment of faith you could say to it, 'Be removed, disappear, go away.'* He was exaggerating. You can't move mountains with something so small you can hardly see it, at least you couldn't in Jesus' day. But now you can. Break open the tiniest thing imaginable - so tiny it is impossible to imagine it. Release the power in an atom and a mountain becomes a pile of ash.

A farmer took a mustard seed and buried it and it burst into life. I don't know how big a mustard tree is, Jesus was exaggerating when he said it was the largest of all trees, but it was big enough to provide shelter to whole flocks of restless, homeless birds. A woman took a little yeast and she hid it in three measures of flour. There it exploded with energy. Three measures of flour with a little yeast in it would feed one hundred and sixty people.

You can imagine Jesus as a child, always curious, always wanting to know how and why things happen. He's standing on the edge of the field watching the farmer sowing and he returns week after week to see what is happening to the seed which the farmer threw away. Or he's in the kitchen peering over Mary's shoulder. She's mixing lifeless flour and water, then she adds the yeast and he watches the miracle. It swells, the dough comes alive. You can knock it about and it will bounce back. You can expose it to the burning coals and it will be transformed into golden loaves.

Is that what religion should be like? you can almost see him thinking. *Is it about making a little go a long way?* Taking a little of something that looks dead and discovering there's life in it. Allowing it to break open, to take wing, to ferment and to fizz, so that the desert becomes a home to the birds and the tasteless dough becomes wholesome food.

The farmer **hid** the seed in the earth, the woman **hid** the yeast in the flour. Jesus had a lot to say about those who displayed their religion, those who stood on the street corners to pray, *They have their reward,* he said with contempt. True religion is hidden in the depths of our being.

One seed is all that is needed to produce a handful, with a little yeast you can make enough bread to feed a crowd, one grain of mustard will grow into a tree where a flock of birds can nest. Too much yeast and the bread is unpalatable, too many mustard seeds and they become weeds. Too much religion is toxic. One of the most destructive things on God's earth. It turns the bread sour, it fills good land with weeds. It's not religion that's the problem, its too much of it.

But if there's one thing more dangerous than too much religion it's no religion at all. Russia at the turn of the 20th century had too much religion. It helped to produce a sour and corrupt society. But Russia with no religion was infinitely worse. If you want to know where no religion leads don't consult Dawkins, he's not the expert. Go to Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, go to the gas chambers and the gulags and the millions who have perished there. The 20th century should have put an end to the illusion that no religion is the answer to too much religion.

All we need do is to find a place in the soil of our hearts for a fragment of faith. Perhaps so small we may at times doubt its very existence. But trust it. Give it a little space, such as a few minutes prayer each day and one hour or so a week in the quietness of this church, water it regularly with God's word. Let it do its work and like all good religion it will provide shelter for the homeless and food for the hungry.