

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Bible Study Series

Sermon Parables and the Teaching of Jesus Christ Church, Noida

Matthew 13:31-32

Mark 4:30-32

Luke 13:18-19

Matthew 17:20

1 Corinthians 1:27-28

Mark 15:13

Luke 23:34

Matthew 11:28

Galatians 3:28

What is the Kingdom of God like? That is the question Jesus puts before us today. It matters greatly to Him, for the Kingdom of God is the central message He preached. But what is a kingdom? Simply put, it is the land and the people under the rule of a king or a queen. Yet it is about more than who is in charge; it is about who defines what life is like within the kingdom.

What, then, does Jesus say the Kingdom of God is like?

“Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it.”
— Luke 13:18-19

This is how God is at work in the world! Strange, is it not? A tiny, tiny seed is planted, and it grows into a tree big enough for birds to nest in. It is a gardening image: you take the little seeds, spread them out, perhaps water them and do some weeding, and then something amazing happens, which even those with a master’s degree in botany still find amazing. The little dried seed becomes life, and that life fosters new life in new seed, and takes its place in the larger web of creation through its relationship with others: birds, insects, worms, and, of course, people like us, who eat the fruit of the plants.

The parable seems to sum up the whole Christian enterprise. From small beginnings you can change the world. From a handful of disciples, a movement has grown that now spans the whole world. This is the power of faith: faith as small as a grain of mustard seed can move mountains (Matthew 17:20).

It starts with a little seed, but watch, and it will grow into the mightiest of trees. So preachers have, for centuries, held up the dramatic growth that comes through the power of faith. The parable has inspired the building of impressive churches, carried the Gospel to new lands, and brought unbelievers to faith. All from one little seed!

How many Christians are there in the world today? More than two billion, close to a third of the world's population. Who would have guessed, two thousand years ago, when the body of Jesus was laid in the ground, that His body would rise up out of the ground, and that His resurrected body, His Church, would grow taller and taller, to more than two billion people tall? Who would have guessed? You see, there is something about His Kingdom, there is something about Jesus, which not only grows, but grows enormously. The mustard seed in this parable of Jesus tells us that growth always has a humble and small beginning, but can, in the end, bring unexpected and surprising results.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, a seed so tiny that it takes a thousand of them to fill a matchbox. Scatter them in a field and they grow five or six feet tall, and in some regions as much as fourteen feet, producing a canopy of brilliant yellow, like fire, or the blazing sun. In a forest of mustard branches, birds and butterflies find their home, and all is at peace in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of God, the Reign of Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus is Lord, the Messiah, a new heaven and a new earth: all these are phrases that describe what happens when God's glory shows up, when the divine order breaks into the chaos of human existence.

The process of life is a reflection of the wider life of God. Order is brought out of chaos. That is what God does in the story of Creation: the Spirit of God moves upon the face of the waters, bringing order out of chaos. Where nothing existed, there is now a universe, with galaxies and stars and planets, the earth, oceans and land, trees and whales, birds and people, bears and camels, snakes and squirrels, and a whole host of wondrous, dazzling diversity.

And we know where Jesus is focused as He builds His Kingdom. He is focused on you and me. This parable is a good example of how God works in the lives of ordinary people, and, specifically, of how He uses us to fulfil His will and to build His Kingdom. He places a tiny, tiny gem of an idea, or a sense of direction, within us, and, working through His own will, takes that tiny thing and makes it into something bigger and better.

Since God always does things in His own time and in His own way, we do not always know how or when that seed will be planted. It could come in the form of a thought, or a dream we have at night, or a conversation with a friend or a member of our family. It could come through our job, our social work, or our work in the church. It could come through the pastor, or through another member of the church family. The possibilities are endless, because with God all things are possible. We may not always know when God plants that seed, but when, at some point in the future, He reveals His plan for our lives, we are often amazed.

When He plants that seed, we may not always understand what He wants us to do or to become, but He will reveal His plan in His own time and in His own way. Some have been called by Him to ordained ministry, and others to lay ministry. Some of us have been called to a ministry in music, as our organist and choir have been, and some to minister to the young people of our congregation. Some of us have been called to serve the wider community through our outreach, and the list can go on. In each case, our ministry has its roots in the tiny seed that Jesus planted in each one of us. That is how He builds His Kingdom. The sum total of all of this is what His Kingdom looks like!

It is worth noting that an organisation called the Mustard Seed Foundation gave our Chalera outreach project its start. It provided the seed funding that gave us the incentive to begin. Today, as you know, it has become one of the most respected outreach projects in the Church of North India. It is a living example of a humble start growing into a great work, and that is how we need to see it. I firmly believe that this noble project has the blessing of our Lord Jesus, and that He works with us in it, for it fits well with the very spirit of His Kingdom.

If someone had told me, in the year 2000 or earlier, that I would one day stand before this congregation as a Lay Leader, or serve as the Church Treasurer, or be connected with the ministry in any way at all, I would not have given it a second thought; I would have dismissed the idea out of hand, though, like most of us, I did harbour a hidden desire to be of some use to the Lord. All was well with me, or so I thought. We all think that. Then a great calamity descended on me, and I found myself in the middle of what looked like an insurmountable crisis, facing a wall. Month after month I would sit in the rear pew of this church, seeking direction from Jesus. I often wondered when He would speak to me and change the course of my life. I did not realise that Jesus had already placed that tiny seed in me. A chance encounter with our presbyter, in the church one weekday, led from one thing to another: he put me on the list of those who read the Scriptures at the Sunday services, and a few months later I found myself, to my utter disbelief, preaching on a chapter from Ephesians at the Sunday evening service. Today I stand before you with nearly twenty-five sermons behind me. I am now at peace with Jesus, with the world at large, and with myself. I see His purpose for me. I am one of His very, very tiny seeds, and I am happy to be one.

What is your story today? Reflect on your life, and you will know.

From a tiny seed, smaller than the head of a pin, comes impressive growth, with power to move mountains and to change the world, to the glory of God. This is what the parable of the mustard seed is all about: great things emerge from small beginnings.

If we have understood this much, where, then, is the problem? The

problem is that none of us wants to be a little seed. We all want to be taken seriously, to be treated with full dignity, and to be recognised as somebody. Deep down, in the hidden places of our own stories, every one of us wants to be big.

I have watched this all my life: in the office, in society, and in church as well. Because we are afraid of being small, we build walls. We draw lines between people, by caste, by status, by wealth, even by the size of our offering, and we sit in judgement over those on the other side of the line. We spend our energy proving that we are better than others, when inside we suspect that we are not. And when a little power comes our way, as it does from time to time, in a committee or an office of the church, we are tempted to lord it over those who are weaker than ourselves. That is what the fear of being small does to us.

Then Jesus gathers us, all of us, the small, the large and those in between, and tells us a parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field" (Matthew 13:31). He does not choose the cedar of Lebanon or the mighty oak. He chooses the smallest of seeds, a plant the farmer hardly notices, and says: this is what My Kingdom is like.

That is the way God has always worked. Paul tells us, "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen" (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). A carpenter's son from Nazareth; twelve ordinary men, fishermen and a tax collector among them; a Church that began in an upper room. And so Jesus would have us reach out, not to the winners, but to those the world has written off: the child who is failing at school and has stopped believing in himself; the woman whose marriage has broken down; the man fighting his anger, or his dependence on the bottle; the parents struggling to make ends meet and to bring up their children well in a hostile world; the professional who has lost everything and is taking the first, shaky steps towards rebuilding his life. These are the little seeds of the Kingdom. And, if we are honest, so are we. Jesus reaches out to us in our brokenness, our lostness, our spiritual poverty, our hurts, and, yes, our sin.

Yet, far too often, every one of us, without exception, turns away from Him. It was fear that made the crowd cry, "Crucify him," and it is fear that still drives us away from Him today. And then, in the full power of the love of God, He forgives. From the cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And He still says to each one of us, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Come home.

His Kingdom is the home He offers us: a home that began in a stable, passed through a cross on a lonely hill, and opened out of an empty tomb into an upper room, where the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples

as a rushing mighty wind, and sent them out into the field of the world as seeds of faith. Every one of us is sown in that field: the proud and the ashamed, the puffed up and the humbled, the broken and the healing, the weak and the strong.

That is what the Church is meant to be: the branches of the mustard tree, where the poor are rich in Christ, where caste and colour make no difference, where “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), and where every child of God knows that he or she is infinitely loved. It is where the birds of the air, and you and I, find a home in which no one is a stranger.

That is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It is like a mustard seed: from small beginnings, we are transformed into a glorious display of the power of God. This is the faith in which we stand; this is the faith in which we find our salvation. Let us not despise the day of small things, nor despise being small ourselves, for it is the small that Jesus chooses to grow.

Thanks be to Jesus, who gives us growth, both now and for ever. Thanks be to Jesus that we are tiny, so that we can grow. Let us pray that He opens our hearts and minds to accept the tiny seed He has planted in each one of us, so that we become partakers of His Kingdom. Amen.