

## **The Mustard Seed**

As a theological student, one of the exercises I had to do - repeatedly - was called a text-to-sermon. We took a passage from scripture, did an in-depth critical analysis, and then wrote a sermon based on that analysis. When starting my first text-to-sermon exercise 14 years ago, I made *two mistakes*. I chose to do the parable assignment first; and then, I tried to find as short a parable as possible, thinking to save myself some work. BIG mistake. The parable I chose was a very small parable about a very small thing: the mustard seed. The problem is that scholars can't agree on what those two short verses mean!

You may be surprised to hear that. When we were taught about parables in Sunday School, usually the meaning was considered fairly straight-forward. In fact, parables are perhaps the most difficult form of NT literature to interpret, because they are inherently open to a variety of interpretations, but not all interpretations. Their meaning for us comes from where the details of the story jolt us into taking a second look at what the story may be saying about God and ourselves.

Parables generally start out fairly realistically. We have a picture of a tiny seed, sown in a field. Nothing spectacular - an illustration taken from nature. This tiny seed grows - and grows and grows. Still reasonable; that's what seeds do. But it keeps growing, and becomes a tree big enough for birds to nest in. OK, now things are getting a bit out of hand. Any farmer who has had to get rid of wild mustard in their fields can tell you there is no way that mustard is ever going to get that big, or that sturdy. And come to think of it, isn't it kind of odd that the farmer has only sown one teeny, tiny seed in a whole field?

That's typical of a parable. It starts off sounding pretty ordinary, but when you listen closely, the details get more and more unlikely and extravagant. This is not just Jesus adding the typical storyteller's embellishments. The strangeness of the story of the mustard seed is there for a reason. That strangeness is there to challenge our assumption that we understand, to make us look more closely at the signs and symbols of the parable and where they may connect with our lives.

This story is part of a group of parables about the kingdom of heaven which are found together in Matthew's gospel. In telling this parable, Jesus is trying to tell us something about what God's reign is like. I said "**is**" not "**will be**" because the kingdom of God, Jesus proclaims, is at hand. I'm guessing that it doesn't look much like it's at hand to you. It sure doesn't to me a lot of the time. I imagine many of us here have observed that the world, as they say, "is going to hell in a hand-basket". Global warming, ethnic cleansing, civil war, environmental destruction, wide-spread epidemics, child poverty - **not** what we'd generally call signs of the reign of God. If the reign of God is here, it's doing a very good job of staying hidden.

The *mustard seed*, in the beginning, is hidden in the earth. Those passing by would see only an empty field - nothing there but dirt and weeds. But we know that there is something growing in secret, something that will do the impossible, that will grow beyond the limits of what is expected and believable. The seed will become a tree, providing shelter and shade to the birds of the air. A peaceful scene, isn't it? Quite a contrast to the mayhem that flashes across our TV screens every night.

So maybe now we have a handle on the parable. While the kingdom of heaven began in secret, it is growing, and in God's time we will see a reign of peace and harmony. But how do we get there from here? How do we get rid of the mayhem and find ourselves this peace?

There are two answers to this question: **we don't**, and **we already have**. Are you really confused now? **Good**, because parables are *supposed* to make us sit up and take notice. I don't want to draw any obvious parallels or easy answers: for example, I could say that the hiddenness of the seed is now, and the peaceful wonder of the tree is what is to come, and that if we work hard enough we will see this day of peace dawn; but that's too easy. Both the hiddenness of the kingdom of heaven and the surprising fruit of what was hidden are *now and yet to come*.

Tiny seeds of the kingdom have been sown, and are being sown, and will be sown, not by us, but by God. So many seeds: seeds of faith, seeds of justice, seeds of the gospel - all these seeds have been sown throughout the ages, and they have grown, and they have produced something marvellous which surpasses its humble beginnings, whether we recognise it or not. In Jesus, God has sown a very special seed, and through the work of the Spirit the sowing continues - here and there, in places unexpected and in forms that may seem less than promising. The church is an example of what God can do from humble beginnings: If God can build a church on a foundation of rough fisher-folk, peasants and former zealots, and keep that church alive through 2000 years, then God can - and is - making something out of this world which sometimes causes us so much despair.

But why can't we see it? The seeds of the kingdom are cloaked in mystery. We fail to know it, because it is the kingdom of *God*. and while in Christ we are assured of God's faithfulness and love, we cannot *fully know* the mind of God. No-one but God knows when the reign of God will come in full, and what it will be like.

But wait; I said we already have the kingdom - I said that we have already seen the fulfilment envisioned in that miraculous tree. That's what's so wonderful and strange about the kingdom of heaven. While we do not always recognise it in the world around us, it is here and we are a part of it. Through the love of Christ we have been given access to God's reign. We carry God's reign with us, just as Christ carried the reign of God with him. Christ came proclaiming the kingdom of God, and it is he that brought it into being. As his followers we carry the kingdom with us. It is not our job to build the kingdom - it is here, and it is coming.

I can't claim to have pinned down "THE MEANING" in capital letters of the parable. But I am going to suggest today that we reflect on what it means to carry

the reign of God with us: What does it mean to those around us? What does it mean for our own lives? What does it mean to say that we, ourselves, and all the disciples of Jesus, carry that mustard seed with us - that in our lives the reign of God is taking shape, and is revealed in its glory. The word that comes to mind is "**WOW!**".

**We** may not even recognise that seed within ourselves: but it is there, and the Spirit of God is working in us to make known to those around us the reality of the reign of God: the reign of love, of justice, of mercy, of peace.

I will not set before you a program for reaching the kingdom, for the kingdom reaches us, not the other way around. I will leave you instead with some words of Jesus to ponder from Matthew's gospel : "I will open my mouth to speak parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world...Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears for they hear." What is hidden is revealed, and what is revealed is hidden. The reign of God in all its fullness takes no form we can understand and predict; but we know that it exists, for Christ has said it, and we know we can trust in him.

In the midst of the darkness of the world we live in, let us remember that we each of us carry the mystery of the Reign of God with us, and through us, it may be revealed in all its unexpectedness and glory, to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. God's kingdom has come, and is coming: thanks be to God. Amen