

VPBC Sermon 13 August 2017. Speaker: Geoff Thorington-Hassell

The Parable of the Mustard Seed *Matthew 13:31, 32*

Why is the Kingdom so insignificant?

We continue this morning by looking at the second parable as part of the selection of parables recorded for us in *Matthew 13*. In this short series of five through to the first week of September, we are looking at how in the **overall theme of “the Jesus we never knew**” how these parables tell us something about the Kingdom of God. The talks stand on their own so if you miss one given the too-ing and fro-ing over summer, (and we have a lot of people away this morning) you won't miss out. There is of course the opportunity to catch up with our podcast service on the web.

Although the commentators normally speak of seven parables in this chapter I have slipped in an eighth on the basis of Jesus introducing it, as he does with most of the other parables, **as “the kingdom of heaven is like....”** as he introduces the householder parable in *Matthew 13:52*.

Last week we looked at the weeds and thought a bit about why now Jesus introduces the teaching idea of parables, something about the mystery of the Kingdom and why, with the breaking in of God's Kingdom in Jesus evil persists. The mystery of the Kingdom is only mysterious in the sense that God's truth comes from revelation not natural insight. The kingdom itself while present, persistent, patient is hidden and unexpected. Yet though it is breaking in, overcoming, delivering and blessing humanity-society itself is not uprooted. It will be fulfilled in the end but in this present age we live in a mixed society and evil will co-exist until the end of the age. **Not least because in Jesus Kingdom outsiders can become insiders and God's reconciling love for sinners means what are weeds can be transformed by God's seed into wheat.** The seed and the harvest are both the work of God. That the seed has powers resident within it that is beyond all we can do. We can sow the seed but the Kingdom harvest is God's good deed. We can enter it, receive it, look for it, pray for it, we can do things for the sake of the Kingdom, we can tell about it, but only God can give it. It comes as a result of God's new act in Jesus coming into the world.

So today we look at the parable of the mustard seed as one of the four public parables that Jesus told about how the Kingdom of God grows while speaking at the sea shore by the Sea of Galilee. He has had to take to a boat and pull off a little from shore in order to speak to the crowds. It is short and sweet, only two verses. We will look at this through the lens of “Why is the Kingdom so insignificant?” If you remember last time Matthew pointed out Jesus change of practice (*Matt 13:34*) in Jesus using parables “*to tell them all these things to the crowds ; he would not say anything to them without a parable.*” Although we assume a parable means a story with a point, in the original meaning of the word “masal” it also includes proverbs, riddles, wise sayings. This required thought and careful interpretation. They may have been simple stories related to everyday life but their simplicity belies the fact that for the merely curious they

can simply bounce off as to what they illustrate when God is at work. **They can really only be grasped by those who have the spiritual capacity to receive them. So, Jesus asks his disciples at the end of the chapter “Do you understand these things?”**

This parable of the mustard seed is a case in point. At first glance it is simply an easy contrast parable, but is more than that going on? Parables can be more slippery than we imagine. Is it just the fact that although things start small, eventually they grow bigger? They may look and be insignificant at the moment but they grow. As in the English saying, “*from little acorns mighty oaks do grow.*” Great things can come from small beginnings. With that in mind, before we read the text, I thought to show you a little [video](#) that might help you to visualise the plant itself growing in a garden. Although the video it goes on to make reference to *Mathew 17:20* as to Jesus rebuke to his disciples “*that if you have faith as big as a mustard seed you can say to this hill ‘Go for here to there!’ and it will go. You can do anything.*” That, however, is a slightly different story and we will remain with the parable today.

So, the passage is from *Matthew 13:31, 32* and reads as “Jesus told them another parable. *“the kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.”*

This parable is also recorded in *Mark 4:30-32* and *Luke 13:18-19*. There are small differences of emphasis which I don't propose to explore save to point out that Matthew's version is closer to normal practice in planting the seed in the field, rather than a garden, as a commercial crop.

The plant itself is probably the black mustard variety, *Brassica nigra*. Up until the 1950's it was still grown but has since been supplanted by new varieties and the mustard in your mustard jar will more likely have been grown in Pakistan or India than the Middle East. In southern Europe, it was used with honey for coughs apart from adding zest to foods. Its leaves were sometimes used for food, and the seeds also for cooking oil. A fact that all you curry cooks would know about.

Now parables can be slippery things. Some parables have not just one point, but two or three. Some parables are not just stories, but within the story contains elements of allegory, which reveal hidden meanings. This can be by means of symbolism, imagery or events which make it complicated. It helps when Jesus goes on to explain it as with the sower or the soils parable which both the crowd and the disciples were finding it difficult to get their heads around. Also with the parable of the weeds, again in private, it was explained in the house they were staying by the seaside. Nonetheless with this parable it is not explained and on the face of it – does it need to be? It looks pretty straight forward. Or is it? If it is a parable as a story with a point, where is the point? Do you draw the point from the phrase “*when it grows up it is the biggest of all plants from being the tiniest of seeds,*” Or do you draw it from the twist at the end “*it becomes a*

tree so that birds come and make nests in the branches.” Is it just a bit of storytelling to reinforce the first point or is there something else going on here? Is there one point or is there two? If there is one point particularly at what point is it?

So, the Kingdom of God is like. Like what? This time, the focus is not on the seed itself but what happens when it is sown. Although minute, it is not the smallest known seed. The point appears to be that the contrast between this insignificant beginning and the greatest of shrubs. It normally grows, as we have seen, three metres or four meters or so tall. But it is an exaggeration to call it a tree. It is a helpful rule of thumb that when parable story lines start to go a bit weird there is a clue as to what Jesus is really driving at. For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son we tend to focus on the bad behaviour of the youngest son and the grumpy behaviour of the sensible ‘stay at home’ eldest son. The unbelievable bit for his Jewish audience, sons can be a pain as they knew, was the behaviour of the father who ran, yes ran, to greet his returning son. That doesn’t happen in polite society. So, in this parable the bit that would start to make his hearers a bit uncomfortable is the reference to birds. Firstly, they would have been a bit puzzled that although a mighty shrub this is not the same thing as a tree, and the *Brassica nigra* they knew would not be big enough to accommodate the multi occupancy of bird nests. From the Old Testament images of birds from *Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12*. 20-22 birds coming to roost would have suggested Gentiles, non-Jews. So, is Jesus hinting that not only will this insignificant seed grow to a remarkable size but spread beyond Judaism to provide a home as well for the Gentiles? Is the use of the word “tree” deliberately suggesting the use of the tree imagery in the Old Testament as an image of a great empire with the birds in its branches representing the nations gathered together under the protection of empire?

So as Daniel (*Dan 4:20*) interprets the dream to Nebuchadnezzar, he explains “*The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit producing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air- you O King are that tree! You have become great and strong, your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to the distant parts of the earth.*” With an explanation like that Daniel has the makings of a great politician. Or in the grand parable of Ezekiel of two eagles and a vine where a great eagle with powerful feathers and full plumage takes hold of the top of a cedar and carried it off to a land of merchants and planted it in a city of traders (where Daniel is writing from). Then (*Ezk 17.22*) God will take a shoot from the very top most shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain of Israel and it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. “*Birds of every kind will nest in it, they will find shelter of its branches.*” . A pointer too perhaps to Isaiah’s vision of Israel as a light to the nations. **Is 49:6** “*The Lord said to me: I have a greater task for you, my servant. Not only will you restore to greatness the people of Israel who have survived but I will also make you a light to the nations- so that all the world may be saved.*”

So, is Jesus referring to a new empire of world renown? Creating a greater Israel that will draw the nations to itself? If so – why is the Kingdom so insignificant? It might be small, yes, but for empires to grow certain things need to be in place. Indeed, is it an empire at all, or is the Kingdom, the way God works – not like this at all?

It's helpful in talking about imagery to get your logos right. Cedars. Oaks. Eagles. Bears. Lions. That's the stuff of empire. The French have a cockerel, strutting its stuff, not a chicken. The Australians have a powerful kangaroo not a cuddly koala bear. How can you respect a nation or empire who has the national symbol of a bunny rabbit? Jesus uses the symbol of a shrub that the Romans regarded as weed, despite its usefulness, and that does not appear in the iconography of Israel. No vine this but a mustard plant. Issuing a call to faith that God will fulfil his plan of salvation and that in Jesus is the ushering in of redeeming the world and of judgement with the final harvest and its consequences. That is what it will grow into. Yet how is this to be? Jesus talks again about seeds, and in this case, it is about wheat rather than mustard seed, when Greeks, non-Jews, ask to see Jesus. In *John 12* Phillip went and told Andrew then they both went and told Jesus. Jesus in response says *"I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains."*

Jesus was surrounded by at least two or three empires. The first was the Roman Empire, an occupying power who took the inevitable facts of life, death and taxes, to new heights. The paraphernalia of empire was all around. The logo of the emperor as divine involved statutes, was stamped on money. Street names, public buildings, documents, legal systems, bureaucracy was all built around it – and, of course, a well-funded military and navy to keep the peace. *Pax Romana*. Linked to this were decent roads, safety on the seas and massive redevelopments. A new port in Caesarea Philippi. Palaces by the bucket load. Educational advancement and above all trade. Lots and lots of trade and growing markets.

Secondly there was the religious empire of the establishment with a system of synagogues and a massive temple. Morality police, cultural conformity, more taxes, dues, responsibilities, burdens to help sustain, support and staff the whole edifice of national religion.

Thirdly the Herod's who had their own pretensions to empire, their own police, taxes, political ambitions, palaces and building programmes. They all uneasily jostled together mutually despising one another but having to compromise and work some form of accommodation so that it did not end in disaster.

How does God's mustard seed kingdom enter into this mix? After all, even these empires started small and like acorns grew to a mighty oak? Perhaps it is the way it grows? God's mustard seed Kingdom. Jesus mission was not based on empire but Kingdom. God's reign breaking in and preparing people for the future Kingdom of God. Preparing people to decide for that Kingdom. It was accomplished by Jesus, caught in

the confessional statement of *1 Corinthians 15:1-3* “*that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures.*” That through his atoning, substitutionary, sacrificial death he opened up a second covenant on forgiveness (*Jer 31:34*) with a new intimacy with God and the ushering in of a new hope based around faith and love as its driving force – but the greatest of these drivers is love. The death of Jesus was not a defeat but the victory of God overcoming the powers of evil and of empire. As we read in *John 12:31* “*Now is the time for this world to be judged, now the ruler of this world will be overthrown. When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to me.*” The birds of the air. The *Brassica nigra* plant. Yet who gets included? Both exploited and the exploiter, but particularly the excluded. The poor. The peasants. The tax collectors. The sex workers. Women. Foreigners. The quiet of the land. The mechanisms of the movers and shakers have little traction here. An insignificant Kingdom where weak people are made “we” people changed by forgiveness, redeemed and given hope – building lives of faith driven by love. **An insignificant Kingdom in terms of the way the world works.** A derisory question of Jesus “are you a king then?” (*John 18:37*). A critical commentary on the charge sheet on the cross “*the king of the Jews*” arguing instead “*he said he was king of the Jews.*” (*John 19:21*). **A powerless kingdom then, that nonetheless has consequence and fruit which ultimately is an everlasting kingdom that will outlast all empires.**

In this next PP slide is an update on today’s shrubbery from 1910 till now taken from the Pew Research organisation. It claims that in 2010 there are 2.18 billion Christians which represents a third of the global population. What makes this different from most of recorded history in the life of the church **is “that Christians are now so far flung and geographically widespread that no single continent or region can indisputably claim to be the centre of global Christianity.”**

Yet it is not all good news. In some regions Christianity is declining, particularly in places like Europe that used to be the heartland of faith. Yet who also learned more from the empire of Rome at times rather than the House of God in order to grow and extend its faith. The Roman empire itself was profoundly corrupt and built on slavery and enslavement. The European powers too used the mechanism and machinery of empire to conquer, exploit and dominate large proportions of the globe. The church too was caught up in this and some elements of the church became cheer leaders and complicit supporters and encouragers of this and drew great benefits from their allegiance and support -often referred to as “**Christendom.**” **This too is now in retreat.** Historians mark the change from mustard plant to eagle and wolf with the “conversion “of the roman emperor following his victory in battle in 312 AD when Constantine became sole emperor in the West. The term “Christendom” was coined in ninth century England but it goes back to this event which led on the Edict of Milan in 313 AD guaranteeing Christian freedom from persecution throughout the empire and over the next 24 years churches were favoured with privileges and resources lavished upon them. A new Christian city was established “Constantinople.” Depending on your

point of view this marked one of the greatest successes for the Christian church or the greatest disaster to befall the mission of the church.

The British Isles still has vestiges of Christendom but it is also marked by the evidence of post Christendom. Where Christianity is no longer central but marginal in society - moving from the majority to the minority. From being at home in a culture shaped by the Christian story to becoming aliens, exiles, pilgrims. No longer at home. Losing privilege, we are just one among many. No longer able to write laws or exercise direct control but relying instead on witness and explanation. No longer part of the status quo but on a journey of mission in a contested environment. **In short more insignificant. More of a mustard plant.**

But being a mustard plant has its advantages. You can put mustard on your faith, give it a bit more vigour and life and exercise that faith based on trust and reliance on God rather than the privileges of history and culture.

Tom Sine in his book *"The Mustard Seed Conspiracy"* recommends beginning the conspiracy of the insignificant. He tells the story of a shepherd in the Provence region of southern France. In 1913, it was a desolate place because of over cutting of trees and over intensive agriculture. The wild life was gone. The water holes dried up. The inhabitants had left. Every evening in his small cottage he sorted acorns, hazelnuts and chestnuts. Every day he planted. Questioned by a young hiker why he was bothering he replied "someday they'll do somebody some good, and they'll help restore the dry land. I may never see it, but perhaps my children will." ⁱ Thirty years later the hiker came back to the cottage and amazingly the shepherd was still alive, still sorting nuts. The difference was that the entire valley was covered by trees. The wild life had come back. The farmers returned. A delegation from the Chambers of Deputies from Paris came to see it and honour the man who brought the valley to life again.

As we end, what is your mustard seed story? How is God acting through our lives, our church, our Christian community and in our community? **God is transforming the world through the conspiracy of the insignificant. Planting seeds, bringing new life, new hope, new beginnings.** Have we seriously underestimated God as to what, given the size of the resources and transnational body of the Church, he can do to change this world? Change based on kingdom values and purposes and not the way of empire. To give our broken, sometimes selfish and self-serving lives and culturally conditioned values and repent so that we can recreate them into tools of the mustard seed kingdom. Beginning with a community that incarnates the future. In our shared lives of seeking righteousness, justice, peace, reconciliation, wholeness and love in this world with all its empires currently under the sun.

