

## Sermon – Sunday 17 June 2018 – Mustard seeds

Ezekiel 17. 22-end; [2 Cor 5. 6-17;] Mk 4. 26-34

*The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground.*

Two of our readings for this Sunday are about small things growing and sprouting into huge trees in which birds can nest – in the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel it's a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar tree, and in the Gospel, in Jesus's parable in St Mark, it's a tiny mustard seed. God's ways are mysterious, and it is the smallest and least significant things that can catch us by surprise and have unforeseen consequences.

Who would think – if you didn't already know – that a twig or a cutting can grow into a strong plant, or that such a tiny seed could grow into such a huge plant? Seeds are small, and often buried or overlooked, but there's enormous power lying hidden inside them! In these parables Jesus compares the reign of God with the mysterious, hidden way that a seed grows, a fascinating process. It's like that, Jesus says: the kingdom of God is like that, hidden and mysterious, and a very real wonder.

These two seed stories are examples of the way Jesus taught, using parables. The word 'parable' means simply a comparison, setting two things alongside each other: 'this is like this', so: 'the kingdom of God is like this'. If you like, a parable is an analogy, and it often took the form of a story. For a teacher who sat on a hillside and taught crowds of people, both learned and uneducated, rich and poor, powerful and downtrodden, using the power of *story* was an effective way to preach something that's as hard to describe, let alone define, as the kingdom of God. It has been said that one of our most basic human needs is *story*, and Jesus used parables in response to that need.

But parables are more than just good stories, or a simple and useful illustrations to make things clearer. In fact, Jesus's parables sometimes made things more obscure to the hard-hearted and those whose minds are closed. Parables make us think, and think hard.

In the age of science, we tend to think rather too logically and rationally, perhaps using the left side of our brain more than the right. It seems that parables exercise our right brains more, and it wouldn't surprise us if the reign of God has much more to do with the right brain than we might think. Parables challenge our imaginations and perhaps help us to see "connections" we might otherwise miss.

Jesus was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots. The parables, like everything Jesus said, are about God: he wasn't really telling us about a place (kingdom) but rather telling us about a person (God). A parable gives substance to a spiritual truth – just as Jesus the man gave substance to God; we might say that in fact Jesus himself is a parable of God – the presence of God on earth. And that might explain why these stories were and are so powerful, coming from One who mysteriously and powerfully conveyed "who" God is, and what he's like.

The little mustard seed might seem like a nice image, as if the seed is the underdog, the good little seed that survives against the odds, and flourishes, triumphant over the "big seeds." But actually, mustard is not only not a "nice" image, it's not even a "neutral image," according to some Bible scholars. Jesus's hearers would have been surprised and possibly a bit offended by the reference to what they actually considered a rather invasive weed, which they'd never be caught

planting. Rather like the Japanese vine in this country, there was a danger that the mustard shrub (which is what the seed grows into) could get out of control in an orderly garden. And this is how the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus's day saw Jesus's teaching: it could get out of control in an orderly religious world. We know, now, that Jesus's teaching represented life, and a new understanding of what religion means. Also, the spreading shrub growing from this tiny mustard seed might well have reminded Jesus's listeners of the great cedars of Lebanon that the prophet Ezekiel spoke so beautifully of in the first reading (17:22-24), where God is seen taking a "twig" or "sprig" from a mighty cedar, "a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs," planting it high on a mountain so that it can produce fruit and become "a noble cedar", which like the mustard plant in Jesus' parable provides rest in its branches for the birds of the air.

We don't make the same connections with Jesus's words that his first hearers did, and they add another layer of questions for us to ask about the reign of God which, it seems, may be found in unlikely and unexpected and "unworthy" people and places after all. Could the parable suggest that the mustard shrub, the annoying weed, stands for the faith of Christian people even where they count little in the eyes of the world? Just as a parable surprises and baffles us, so do God's ways, mysterious and deep, bringing something great out of something very small, showing the wonder, and the power of it all. The theologian Martin Luther said: "If you truly understood a single grain of wheat, you would die of wonder." From Ezekiel, and from Jesus, we learn that this wonder comes from God's work, not from our own efforts.

So the Gospel passage with its two mysterious little stories about seeds suggests a number of possibilities to think about. Here we could say that

Jesus is reassuring his audience that God is in control, no matter how things appear, and no matter what we do or don't do. With all that's happening to Christians in various parts of the world today, we can still trust in what is happening behind the scenes and beneath the surface, and we can trust the One who is allowing it to happen. The question we might ask is, "What are we hoping for, for the church in this country?" God's promise may not have to do so much with the immediate success of the church (the number of members, our finances, and so on), but with the ultimate triumph of the reign of God. When Jesus talks about that reign, or kingdom, it's always shrouded in mystery, not sketched as a blueprint for the course of history but talked about in stories.

There's so much around us today, as there always has been, that tends to depress us. We see war and hatred, prejudice and injustice, hunger and violence, the everyday grind of so many lives, the apparent hopelessness and intractability of so many problems and conditions. It is indeed difficult to know the ways of God, so often hidden from view or not detected by us (or anyway, not noticed by us). But all the same, God is at work always and everywhere, bringing about his will in unexpected and marvellous ways, like the amazing things that can grow from the tiniest of seeds.

We live out of the hope, born of confidence, that God is in charge of everything, and that we are simply called to participate in what God is doing in the world. That is why we find flashes of brilliant hope and the promise of a greater day to come. They may only be flashes, but they are powerful all the same. Here and there, in many different ways, we see the mysterious ways of God.

It may begin in smallness, in small steps and small hopes, but the path, Jesus says, leads to greatness, a greatness we can't see or even imagine

today. God can see it, and God can imagine it, and most of all, God intends it. The tiny little seed grows into the greatest of all, the mustard tree, strong and big enough to offer shelter and goodness and the stuff of life for those who need to find a home.

Church-going, we're told, is in decline in this country (although there are many congregations that are seeing huge growth). We feel depressed because the Church of England sometimes seems ineffective and powerless. And yet, and yet: What hope lies beneath statistics and reports! What potential lies in giving voice to the smallest but most persistent of witnesses, the truth-telling of the good news of God, all these things that express our commitment and describe our deepest hopes, not only for our church but for the world beyond its walls! How much can we achieve by just making a little bit of difference in the world!

As we look at our own lives and the life of our church, let's think of the moments along the way where we feel God's hand at work, mysteriously, making choices and offering possibilities that no one would have predicted or thought of on their own. Do we see the power and strength of the church in numbers, or in the spirit that thrives within it? Can the spirit be counted or measured? Like the mustard seed, the spirit has unimaginable potential. Let's all look for ways in which we can be the mustard seed that grows and provides shelter and refuge and sustenance to God's creation, and to the people of God! There's such power available if only we'll let God use it!