

2nd Sunday after Trinity

Romey doing prayers

Mark 4. 26-34 0 Vestry group

Asked about circles

Noticing God speak to us

The Parable of the Growing Seed

26 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28 All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

30 Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." 33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything

Lets talk about mustard! Lovely stuff - useful for putting on meat and in dishes to give it some kick. Quite useful, according to Pliny the Elder (what you don't have his cookbook? I'm surprised, he was the best naturalist in 1st Century Rome!) He says mustard is good for health - it is helpful for "snake and scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, leprosy, constipation, lethargy, tetanus and other illnesses!

But here's a problem - the word for Mustard seed - in this and the versions in Matthew and Luke - is not mustard seed. Its a generic word, and could be the small 1 foot herb type plant, or the wilder one which bushes into 10 foot - that's the type Pliny was talking about.

Golly, the number of commentaries I've read where this is discussed! And different hypotheses and explanations put forward.

I mean I'm as keen as the next person to get to the actual meaning and the real things that Jesus said - but wouldn't it be easier if I could just ignore the evidence and read it as mustard seed, and think ah yes - just like I've got on my shelf. Who needs the truth, when I've got an answer ready?!!

But wait, even on a 2nd hand English translation there's another problem. It says - its the smallest of all seeds - according to Mark and Luke. But Jesus - you're wrong! Its not the smallest. Orchids and cypress have smaller seeds.

And then again one version of the story has it as a vegetable that turns into a tree, yet neither the types of mustard seed grows into a tree - so is this a parable about miraculous transformation - about something supernatural - I planted radishes and runner beans came up! But Mark has it as a vegetable with branches - agghh!

So... Lets take a step back.

Normally, parables have very precise meanings, exact interpretations. Words matter. Truth matters.

Here there is a story told in 3 different ways, with some variations - and I think there are points to note..

First - this is the bible, Jesus is talking about spiritual things. This is not a horticulture handbook. This is not where I look to find out how big mustard grows, or which is the smallest seeds - I have google for that. Jesus is telling a story, a story with a point.

In other words, when he says smallest - I think he's just exaggerating to make a point. Camel through the eye of the needle etc. That's even got a name, people do it so often - hyperbole.

Second , where some say vegetable, others say tree, some say garden other say field - I think this is Jesus the master storyteller setting the story in different locations. Jesus told this parable 100 times in a hundred different villages and towns, and he would surely have varied it - ahh, I'm by a field here, or look - we're sitting under a tree here.

And Luke and Matthew and Mark - as master storytellers, they also shape the gospels to tell their story - Luke says garden, as that was more Roman (like when he says with the paralysed man, they took the tiles off the roof, rather than made a hole in the roof. We all know that houses in 1st century Palestine had flat mud rooves, not sloping tiled ones. So either there were 2 separate miracles, one in a roman house - or they have adapted the story to suit the listeners).

Thirdly there is the context. Matthew and Luke place this parable next to the one about the yeast - something small, that is hidden, but has a big effect.

Mark, as we heard, places it next to the seed that grows all by itself - and yields its harvest in due course.

And where does that leave us?

Clear away the weeds of distraction - about which type of mustard and the tree / vegetable issue and we're left with what matters.

The kingdom of God starts small.. as small and seemingly insignificant as a seed. Like one person doing an act of kindness, or saying a simple thing - like I'll pray for you, or I think God made a coincidence happen

But this small seed - it does what seeds do - it grows.

And you may not be able to see it, in fact, don't dig it up, check its temperature, keep checking on it. Otherwise you'll stop it working. Just let it do what it does - naturally, all by itself,

The kingdom of God is not "up to us". And yet - we have a part to play.

Some of the most insignificant little things, can go on to have a massive effect.

And Jesus might have been talking about himself - one man's short life in a Mediterranean country 2000 years ago, has shaped most of the western world, and has 2 billion lives changed! Or he might have been talking about you - your prayers, your life, your witness - which has an untold effect on so many others.

This small seed, will grow - all by itself, and is almost unstoppable. It will become huge and significant, and even birds will come to shelter in it.

Your small action will have an effect on so many others, so much else.

So - take heart and trust God - the seed is growing

Hope and trust - that the kingdom is here and will grow - whether we see it or not, whether we know it or not.

And your homework is of course - to look for signs of the kingdom - of the kingdom - see it in people being kind, or forgiveness, see it in justice or the fight for equality - open your eyes!

And what seed of the kingdom will you plant today? Tell someone about your prayers, or the hope God gives you, or remind them who created all this beautiful world - you never know what may come!