

August 2020 reflection on a mustard seed!

When I was thinking about this week's reflection there is a really good choice of subjects within the readings we were using for Morning Celebration. Over the years I've been done talks which were for services where there were families with children and it struck me that when I and others I have seen give "child friendly" sermons we often start by showing an object or a picture. This generally leads into something like "this reminds me of a story Jesus told..."

Why do we do this? Well I hope it is because it helps us understand the bible story better. It's a strategy we use in teaching. A teacher wanting young children to understand the concept of subtraction might use items to illustrate it. For example, what is 6 minus 2. And to illustrate it might have six apples and ask how many will I have if I take 2 away?

You get the idea.

It is no coincidence that is the same way that Jesus taught his followers about the Kingdom of God. When he taught, he began by saying, "The Kingdom of God is like. . ." and then he would give an example. That method of teaching is called a parable. The Bible tells us that Jesus used parables to teach people in such a way that they would understand. In fact, in Mark's gospel it says, "He never taught without using parables." (Mark 4:34)

Any way I used the reading from Mark's Gospel but I am going to cheat a bit because I want to pinch a bit from Luke's version of the same story and because the theme was about the mustard theme I will even poach another use, by Jesus, of the mustard seed.

In Mark's version

What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you **plant in the ground**. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.

Luke's version

Jesus says "What is the Kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and **planted in his garden**. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches."

(By inference Mark refers to garden plant but Luke goes straight for planted in the garden.)

OK why should this matter? It's really simple.

It was against the law to plant mustard seeds in your garden! Plants in Gardens had to be in neat segregated rows (It was to do with purity and keeping things Holy.)

And, the mustard plant rapidly grows to 10 to 12 feet (3 to 4 metres) which is as big or bigger than most common trees and shrubs in Israel at that time and provided a safe place for lots of birds.

Ask any gardener if they want birds in their vegetable plot, particularly when sowing seeds? Of course not.

Add to that if a prophet were to compare God's kingdom to something horticultural, they would choose the mighty cedar tree of Lebanon, which was an honoured symbol of the nation of Israel.

So when Jesus uses the rapid growing mustard plant as a visual aid to the growth of the Kingdom of God, by the way the Greek word for Kingdom translates as rule or reign (of God)

The picture that Jesus is painting here is of a nice, orderly, religiously proper vegetable garden that is about to be messed up by an invasive weed! And He says, "That's what God's rule and reign looks like! That's what happens when God is in charge!"

He is culturally and logically, chucking bricks into the water.

It makes sense though, if you think about it... When you look at what Jesus did throughout the Gospels, He kept breaking down barriers and disregarding taboos. He flouted the taboos concerning fellowship with sinners. He surrounded Himself with low-lives' and outcasts and those who, socially, were on the margins. Jesus disregarded the taboos concerning mixing with despised tax-collectors. Jesus disregarded the taboos concerning Samaritans and even made a Samaritan the hero of His parable about loving one's neighbour; another illustration, which would have been highly offensive to many. Jesus disregarded the taboos concerning the place of women in society and the segregation/marginalization of women. The list goes on.

This must have been exciting for the disciples to hear. Jesus was talking revolution, rapid change, a new reign of God as King in His Kingdom here on earth, God is in charge. Wow.

So what does this tell us about what we should do here and now?

The mustard seed story relates to the rapid growing of the kingdom, the increase in the number of people who hear the word and start to follow Jesus.

What's our role? It doesn't matter how small we may consider ourselves to be in the world or even in our church, we may think we are too small to be an important part the growing of the Kingdom of God, But when we tell others about Jesus, we help the Kingdom to grow to spread over the whole earth just the smallest action or word can change someone's life forever when they meet with Jesus and this helps the kingdom grow.

Like a seed planted in the dark soil, unseen, the smallest action or word can be a seed growing and can over time bear fruit. I said the smallest action or word can change someone's life forever.

We are only the planter of the seed. God does the rest.

Yes we can make church friendly, yes we can provide support and nurture to help someone new to faith grow.

But and it is a big BUT, often we never see the harvest, the growth of the kingdom from what we have done.

Sometimes this can cause people to become disillusioned. Thinking that despite doing everything they can think of doing, nothing seems to happen. It's tempting to think why bother. Thinking that my contribution is so small and insignificant. That's the time to remember today's teaching from Jesus. Trust the Father, have faith, for what you have started the Father will bring to harvest when the time is right.

So what are we to do with this? Will we insist on maintaining our neat, tidy theological gardens? Or will we do what is absurd—what is taboo—and allow God's rule and reign to mess things up? Will we value order and orthodoxy over radical inclusion and extravagant love? Each of us is like the man with the mustard seed in his hand. We have only to let go and drop it into our garden and then watch what happens.

Oh nearly forgot Matthew. There he records the time when Jesus give hope to the disciples who have just failed in a task (**Matthew 17:20**

Jesus told them. "I assure you: If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will be able to tell this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus uses stories about things that people understood. They knew a tiny mustard seed could grow to a 3 to 4-metre-high bush.

Jesus had used the mustard seed to describe the growth of the kingdom of God but now is using it to describe hoe God can grow our faith in him, even if we only start with a little faith.

He is telling us that Faith is like a mustard seed. Just as the mustard seed is small even if our faith is small it is all God needs is for Him to grow our faith in Him.

Today, We are having our faith tested by that unseen enemy, the Covid virus. If ever there was a time in our lives when we need that mustard seeds worth of Faith, it's now.

We need to take this as an opportunity for new growth as slowly and globally we deny the virus the opportunities to spread from person to person. It is going to be a time for kind words and deeds a time to truly love our neighbours as ourselves.

Prayer

Father, we sometimes think we are too small to be important in the Kingdom of God.

We sometimes feel that we lack enough faith for God to use us.

Help us to remember the parable of the mustard seed.

Use it to remind us that if we will tell others about what Jesus has done for us and what he wants to do for them.

Help us to love our neighbours as we should so we really will have a part in growing the Kingdom.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Keep safe

Peter