

Sermon 13 June 2021

Mark 4:26-34 and Ezekiel 17:22-end

The Mustard Seed

I'm guessing that few of us here grew up in an agricultural setting and even fewer of us live in one today.

Jesus' parables are visual stories, painting word pictures that invite their hearers to engage with the common everyday things around them.

Put those two statements together and you can see that we might have difficulty getting to grips with this parable about the mustard seed.

So, I'm going to invite you to think of a garden. Any garden. It could be your own, your neighbours, that wonderful one you are bit envious of, one that you aspire to, one you are glad you don't have the responsibility of its upkeep, one that is very modest, one that is kept to regimental standards of exactitude, one that is a cheerful mix of overlong grass, pretty weeds, shady trees and seasonal cottage plants. Maybe you think of an orchard, or an allotment. Maybe it's a simple window box. Or maybe even just a far off view from a high up window. Perhaps it is the sweep of the Downs, or the Common where mown grass gives way to wild flowers. There might be a pond.

Whatever it is, tidy or rather random, this is often the closest we get to being able to know what Jesus' farming parables are like.

If we are gardeners or allotment holders, we know the trials, or the pleasure, in trying to grow what we want or need, in the places and times that we choose.

Jesus' words speak to those trials and pleasures. He isn't giving us farming or gardening tips. He is instead teasing us, wanting us to think about God and about his kingdom.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed....

The traditional view is that God's kingdom is like a mustard plant because it grows from something very small to something rather tall and majestic and offers shelter in its branches. It is a rather gentle pastoral image. Even though in fact the black mustard seed grows into a shrub rather than a tree.

But there is an alternative view and one that has an example within our own experience.

I wonder how many of you grow mint in your gardens? And how many of you contain in some way? If so, why do you do that? It's because mint has a habit of springing up all over the place.

So the more radical alternative view is that Jesus might have been talking about a plant that grows in the Middle East, whose leaves have a pungent flavour, like mustard. It does grow, very fast, into a large tree. It grows wild.

Once planted, it is impossible to eradicate. For the seed germinates as soon as it falls to the ground. The seeds fall constantly.

If you think of the kingdom of God as being like this type of mustard seed, then it opens up a very different view of the kingdom. It is wild and it is impossible to eradicate. It points to the work of establishing the kingdom as being the work of God, and not entirely our responsibility. Whilst we do indeed have our part to play in bringing God's kingdom into the places where we live and work, it is good to remember that it is not a tender plant that unless it has the right conditions, the right soil, the right amount of sunlight and water, it will wither and die. The kingdom of God is more like mint or dandelions.

But notice too that Jesus says the birds of the air make nests in its shade.

Sometimes birds are a bit of pest. I sowed some grass seed last year and all I did was end up with plumper pigeons strutting around the lawn.

So, maybe the reference to the birds, is not a nice pastoral picture, maybe it's a reference to the fact that the kingdom will disrupt us. Maybe it will attract people whose behaviour or lifestyle will challenge us? Will we be able to see that they God's children as much as we are – maybe even more so? We pray in the Lord's Prayer, 'thy kingdom come', if/when that happens how will we respond?

The Kingdom of God is an unsettling force. It attracts outsiders and outcasts to its shelter, who will disrupt the lives those of us who thought we were planting the seed.

It is random, it is dynamic, it does not stand still.

The kingdom may not grow as we want it, it may not grow where we want it, it might not look like we want it to look, but it will grow.

Ezekiel's vision of a tree that grows tall and strong, slowly achieving maturity, grew out of the catastrophe of Israel being taken into exile. And it tells us that everywhere is under God's care.

The promise of the kingdom is not a promise of triumph.

The kingdom is found in the humdrum, nitty gritty of everyday life.

This past year has taught us that we can't see into next week, let alone into eternity. And so I think this parable is asking us to live in the present, in the places and with the people where we have been planted. It encourages us to look at what God is doing and to join in, even if that feels a bit wild.

What does it make you think and feel?

Sarah Thomas 13 June 2021

