



**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,
“The Good News in Parables”**

2 March 2025

Readings: Mark 4:21-34, Isaiah 6:9-10, Colossians 1:3-6

Combined Service on the day of the AGM.

Pre-Introduction

Thanks Helen for reading from the Bible. It would be good to keep your Bible or Bible App or the sheet with the readings open at Mark 4. And thanks Brendan for capturing something of what we have been seeing, and will see in Mark’s account of the life of Jesus as we work through it this term.

‘Who is this Man?’, the song asked, and that is an underlying question right through the first half of Mark. Who is this Man? Who is this Jesus? He is the King of kings (as we sang), who, as we read back in chapter 1... went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

“The time has come, the kingdom of God is near.
Repent and believe the good news!” (1:14-15)

God’s Kingdom is near because Jesus the King has come near.

Through the first three chapters we are repeatedly told of Jesus preaching and teaching but Mark, thus far, has concentrated more on the actions of the kingdom - the healing and the deliverance from evil spirits that Jesus brings. But now, in chapter 4 we get a more extensive report of what Jesus says as he preaches and teaches **the Good News in Parables**, by the lake, and then on the lake.

We didn’t read the parable of the Sower, in the first half of the chapter (but stay tuned for a catchup on that in a couple of months) but we did hear 4 parables and this morning we are going to focus on the last one, **the parable of the mustard seed**. So let’s pray as we come to consider it together.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as you taught by the lake so long ago, teach us now. Help me speak clearly and correctly. Speak to us through your word, and by your Holy Spirit.

Amen

Introduction

What is a Parable? One simple, popular definition is, ‘an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.’ They are vehicles for conveying God’s truth, stories as opposed to systematic details. Jesus told stories about common things to convey truth, to teach, and so...

1. The Mustard Seed

‘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.’ (4:30-31)

The Earthly Story

The mustard seed is not actually the smallest seed. I believe orchid seeds are, but mustard seeds would have been the smallest seeds in the understanding of those listening to him, and

the mustard seed was proverbial for smallness. You are familiar with Jesus speaking about faith the size of a mustard seed.

And this speck of a seed, '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.' (4:32) The mustard seed becomes a large shrub or small tree, perhaps 2-3 metres high; and with the right variety in the right conditions, can be even bigger.

The apparent inconsequentiality of the seed should not fool us. In the small seed we have something which will become big enough to provide shade for birds. In comparison to the seed, the bush is large.

The Heavenly Meaning

Well, that's interesting, but Jesus is not giving a botany lesson. It's a parable! That's the earthly story, so what is the heavenly meaning?

We are not told of an explanation (unlike the parable of the sower and the soils in the first half of the chapter) but we are told, at least in a general sense, what it is about.

The Kingdom of God

'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. (4:30-31)

Jesus taught – back in chapter 1 – 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news,' so it's not surprising that the Good News in parables, is often related to the Kingdom of God. (1:14-15)

The Kingdom is like: a man who sowed good seed in his paddock; yeast that a woman mixed into flour; treasure hidden in a field; a king who wanted to settle accounts; a landowner who went out to hire workers..., etc, etc.

No one parable is going to capture the complete and complex nature of the kingdom of God, so 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? At least in part it is like a small mustard seed, which becomes a large tree.

Now you would have to say that the mustard seed and plant is not a good choice if Jesus is trying to establish the greatness of the kingdom. 'The Kingdom of God is like the Cedars of Lebanon,' might have been better?

In picking a mustard seed and the mature mustard bush, the emphasis is on the contrast in size - rather than final size. And there is a direct connection between the smallness and insignificance of the start of the Kingdom of God and its all-significant final state.

Like the mustard seed, the Kingdom of God starts off small and insignificant and becomes large and very significant. 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?'

It is like...

- great oaks which grow from little acorns;
- the song which says, 'from little things big things grow' (Paul Kelly);
- the proverbial small-town person who makes good;
- Bill Gates, the back-room programmer who becomes the richest man in the world;
- the spark that becomes a forest fire.

Jesus has announced that the Kingdom of God is near but despite the wonderful things Jesus is doing and saying, the beginning of the kingdom is small and insignificant.

A Small Kingdom

Fishermen, tax collectors, and sinners are hanging around. Those that matter – the religious leaders – are already plotting to kill him, and in few chapters Jesus starts talking about his death. This is hardly the stuff of the great, glorious, large kingdom of God. This is small.

And part of the reason for its smallness is found in Jesus' comment at the conclusion of a couple of the parables in this chapter,

'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' (4:9 and 23)

But not everyone had ears to hear. For many – it's in one ear - out the other. And in fact - for some - there is an unpleasant side effect, that Jesus mentions after the parable of the sower and the soils.

'The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"' (4:11-12)

Jesus is quoting the LORD's words in the Isaiah passage we read earlier in the service.

It is somewhat ironic, both in Isaiah and here in Mark, and has the sense, 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; because the last thing they want is to turn and have their sins forgiven!'

The parables bring to light the disparity that exists in the hearers' capacity to respond that has just been illustrated in the parable of the soils. Jesus' teaching creates a split between insiders and outsiders; between those who gather to learn the secret of the kingdom and those who don't.

'Everything comes in parables. (4:11)

Parables are somewhat opaque and do require explanation. And what is revelation to some is a riddle to others and they end up befuddled, not so much because of a thick skull but a hardened heart.

It's two-edged sword – the parables reveal the mystery of the kingdom to some and conceal it from others.

The secret comes only to those who respond, those who hear and follow. The disciples are not quicker than others, they are not able to unravel it for themselves. The insider is not different from outsider in the sense that they both need an explanation of the parables. The difference is that some choose to come to Jesus for the explanation, and those who won't hear, don't hear, don't understand and don't turn.

Some do not regard what they have heard as important enough to bother coming for revelation. Some regard it as something they don't want to hear, because the last thing they want is to turn. And we saw the extreme case of that last week, when refusing to believe that Jesus is from God, the Herodians and Pharisees plot to kill him. (3:6)

And in reference to the parable we didn't read, the sower sows into all types of soil; the gospel is preached to all and if some prove blind or deaf the result here in Mark 4 is a small beginning, a kingdom like a mustard seed.

Some gather around, some turn, but by the response of many it doesn't really look like the kingdom of God is near at all. And despite a fairly spectacular arrival in Jerusalem in Mark 11 within a week Jesus is dead.

That's a mustard seed of a beginning. Small and insignificant and in the eyes of onlookers in this backwater of the Roman empire when an upstart wanna-be Messiah meets an appropriate end.

But paradoxically this is what the Kingdom of God is like. 'It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed. 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.'

The death of Jesus, is in effect, the planting of the seed, so when does the tiny mustard seed of God's kingdom grow and become the large mature tree of God's Kingdom?

A Large Kingdom

Is it the fact of Jesus' resurrection and ascension? But even then there are only 120 followers of this king, members of this kingdom, sitting around waiting for something to happen.

What about the day of Pentecost - the pouring out of the Holy Spirit? Some 3,000 converted in one day and becoming part of the kingdom. But still; pretty small and insignificant.

What about the spread of Good News though through the book of Acts? Paul's travels, people turning to Christ, new churches planted. And even though at the end of Acts we have Paul, 'boldly and without hindrance preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 28:30-31) Christians are still a persecuted minority.

What about the 'conversion' of Constantine and the 'Christianisation' of the Roman Empire and the beginning of Christendom. Yeah, nah... not really.

And we still do not see God reigning as universal king. Some 2,000 years after Jesus, Christians are still in the minority, the world is a mess, many people clearly are not living under the reign of God. Even the church appears, in many times and places, to also be a mess.

If the Kingdom has come, if God is reigning, why is the world the way it is. The healing, the restoring, the releasing from evil, the forgiving of sin that the kingdom promised and that we have seen in the first three chapters of Mark are a far cry from the reality we see.

The kingdom has come, but it is still a mustard seed. The kingdom is coming. it is growing but the consummation, the full fulfilment, the mature full-grown plant is yet to come.

But because God's reign has come in Christ, we can already partake in some of the joys of the age to come. Although in many senses, still a seed, we have a glimpse already of the tree. Things from the age to come are available to those who now chose to put themselves under God's reign, who trust in Jesus, thing like: being forgiven, being justified (declared to be right with God), having a dynamic relationship with the creator of the universe, being called God's children, being filled with the Holy Spirit - given to us 'a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.' (2 Corinthians 5:5)

We are part of the seed of the kingdom but we glimpse the tree and experience part of that fulness because in Jesus, and particularly in his death and resurrection, the kingdom has come.

But wait, there's more, more we can look forward to, when this age ends, and the age to come is all that there is, to that time when every knee will bow, when Jesus reigns fully and finally as king, the time of the mature mustard tree, the time when 'the old order of things has passed away' (Revelation 21:4), the time when there is a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9)

And as we wait for the consummation of the Kingdom, for the mature tree, we pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' and like Paul we preach the kingdom of God and teach about Jesus, knowing that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Conclusion

Did you hear what Paul said to the Colossians in the verses that Steve started the service with? How he was thankful that they had heard the good news, and that the good news was bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world just as it had been doing among them since the day they heard it and truly understood God's grace. How did they hear? The verse that follows on from what we read tells us.

'You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.' (Colossians 1:7)

And we must be 'Epaphrases', telling others of this kingdom and of the King, so they can be a part of it. It looks insignificant now, but Christ is returning and so as we wait, we share the Good News and there are opportunities we have to do that in specific ways – Christianity Explored, Alpha, and Hope for the Illawarra (flyers available). Families@4, in the reshaping to Life@4, is seeking to be an accessible point of contact, so others can hear and respond to the Good News.

As we head in to an AGM shortly, may the business of the church and all that has to take place there be part of what supports our ministry to make the Good News known.

Amen.