

Mark 4:26-34

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.

The parable of the seeds

Mark 4:26-34

I dug over a flower bed last week in which I was going to plant some seeds but I was annoyed by the apparent lack of information about how you sow seeds. My wife said you just sprinkle them. I'm someone who when I'm cooking for instance likes to follow a recipe to the letter. I think this is a similar thing, I'd like the seed packet to say: plant each seed 43mm apart and 10mm deep, and I would be happy. Jesus was obviously very much someone who observed the activities of whoever was around him, and sowers of seed seemed to provide a lot of inspiration for his parables.

Sometimes when I come to look at a particular passage something different jumps out which I had not seen before, before I even look at a commentary. There were no theologians to point out things to the disciples of course, which might be an argument for never bothering with commentaries! But then other people often see things that I completely miss! Anyway here what's interesting is the lack of control that anyone has over the process of the growth of a seed. Once it's scattered, it's completely out of the farmer's hands, at least for the purposes of Jesus' parable. I'm sure it's not strictly true because obviously it has to be watered and generally kept an eye on and looked after.

But He previously told the parable about the sower where the soil conditions are crucial, so maybe he was balancing it out here by emphasising the sheer power of nature, that things are beyond our control.

Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

All by itself the soil produces grain

The Greek word for 'all by itself' here is αὐτομάτη, (automatē) from which we get 'automatic'. It's a miraculous thing at this time of year when everything's suddenly just growing like mad and you can't begin to comprehend the mechanics of it, you just watch in amazement as the colours burst out; hopefully you all saw some of this yesterday in all the amazing gardens.

But the teaching here is not about nature, it's a parable about the kingdom of God, and it's an encouragement for those who might feel they play a very small part, that actually nothing any of us do will in itself be significant without the hidden work of the Spirit.

The smallest contribution, when it's in line with the heart of God, can make a massive difference, even though we might never see the eventual outcome of a sincere act of faith. And of course it's also an encouragement to those who are frustrated by lack of growth, again that we will often not see immediate results from what we plant, in the spiritual sense.

God works in his own time and we can't force belief, because whatever some might think God operates purely out of love.

All by itself the soil produces grain

This is where some so called christians have gone terribly wrong, notably the inquisition and the crusades, thinking you can compel people to believe. In recent times some churches have often put great effort into mission planning in the mistaken belief that they have their finger on the pulse of what the Spirit is doing. I attended a mission in Hastings in 2000 which was almost exclusively attended by christians! Lamar Williamson in his commentary on Mark says this: 'growth is...the miraculous work of God and harvest.. [is] an outcome that is both gift and miracle'.

So the work of the Spirit is beyond human control. John in his gospel compares it to the wind: *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. (3:8)*

And so when we pray 'thy kingdom come and thy will be done', we are surrendering to the work of the Spirit, even though this often goes against our need for control over our own lives and over the lives of others around us, which just causes us damage.

Matt 9:36 When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Right here should be the motive for everything we do.

Jesus follows up with another short parable, the likening of the kingdom of God to the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds.

Annette had some mustard seeds a while back which were so small they were almost like dust. The main point here is that something very small grows into something amazing.

There are smaller seeds and bigger trees, but it's not important – again Jesus is drawing ideas from his surroundings to illustrate a point. The kingdom of God has grown from one man and 12 followers to the present estimate of around 2.5 billion. It's an unstoppable growth, although in the UK, depressingly, it's in reverse. The wholesale rejection of christianity has led to what I can only describe as a moral vacuum which isn't the case in other countries where faith is growing rapidly. In its early years the church grew from those 13 men and being a persecuted movement, to being the official religion of the Roman empire. That was the moment when things began to go wrong because it became part of an establishment which felt it could dictate what people believed. 'Official religion' was the giveaway phrase. Under cover of this state approval the Roman church pursued non-biblical policies which relied on people not being able to read the bible for themselves. For instance the 10 commandments forbade the making of images of God, and so the early church never did. Most christian art from the third century onwards did very little else. The Jesus movement is strongest when it challenges the world, not when it conforms to the world's expectations, because it is not a religion. As I have said before, religions are human-made systems which attempt to achieve connection with God. Jesus, being as far away from religious as you could get, reserved his only real criticism for the religious leaders. He offered salvation by faith alone. There was no qualifying behaviour required except this: repent and believe and follow me and you will receive life in all its fullness.

The Roman Empire effectively put a stop to the Jesus movement as it had been, until the bible became publicly available to read, rather than be interpreted by the church hierarchy. When Christianity becomes religious practice it loses all its life and energy. The Spirit's fire is what changes lives and not anything we do out of our own resources. Our response to this free gift is to worship God and to serve and love others.

And so God's Kingdom continues to grow, not because of the good things we do but out of our response to God's love for us. That while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Rom 5:8

It's interesting that Mark ends the parable with this: *He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.*

He did not say anything to the crowds without a parable. These parables, then, are really like the tiny mustard seeds which planted faith in the minds of those who could not have fully understood them, but they grew because they were truths which gradually became clearer through the work of the Spirit.

And the birds perching in the branches of the mustard tree, ready to fly, are a prophetic picture of the message of the gospel being taken from really small beginnings to the ends of the earth, to the end of time and the second coming of Jesus.