

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 28th February 2021. Andy Banks
Mark 4:26-34 Jesus' Parables: The Power Of The Seed

For those with children in GodZone feel free to access the parallel video to this talk on our YouTube channel. We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life? Today, we're reading from 4:26-34.

[Read Mark 4:26-34]

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

30Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.'

33With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

[Pray]

By the age of eight, the boy had already made a conscious decision: he was not interested in God. His parents had dragged him to church since his birth, but this was definitely not for him! Yet, as he progressed through teenage years, something of the moral framework of his parents' faith gnawed away at his conscience whenever he failed to live up to it – which was frequently. Guilt would hold him in its grip for days, yet somehow it couldn't keep him from fouling up again. He came to despise himself.

His brother became a Christian at university and suddenly he was talking about Jesus and writing Scripture verses at the end of all his letters. Odd! Yet, the boy had no idea that something was also changing within him. Then his English teacher was off for a few weeks and his supply teacher happened to be a Christian. As he taught about the representation of good and evil in Macbeth – standard GCSE work – the boy found himself reflecting upon the good and evil in his own life. It was becoming increasingly clear that God was not going to let him go. Long story short. He read the Bible with his brother each day that summer, his friend invited him to a different, more up-to-date and Bible-centred church, and a year or so later he was baptised into the family of God. And now he's standing before you today telling you his story – or some of it!

There are, in fact, more dramatic parts of my story that I left out – personal experiences and encounters through which God moved me closer to faith. But I shared *those* details to highlight the power of the seeds sown. By my parents and what I absorbed from church as a child, despite hating it – I also learned later that they prayed every day for me to come to faith. Seeds sown by my brother, Pete, as he talked about Jesus, and later as he read the Bible with me each day during his summer holidays. Seeds sown by my supply teacher who was just teaching his subject and had no idea of the spiritual impact he had on my life. And seeds sown by my friend who invited me along to his church, even though, as far as I know, he still hasn't personally committed himself to Jesus through baptism. Each seed on its own might seem small and insignificant, but God made them all grow into faith – and he's been growing my faith ever since.

"This is what the kingdom of God is like," Jesus said. "A man scatters seed on the ground. 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 corn." Its growth is inevitable. The seed grows regardless of what the farmer does, and despite his ignorance about how it happens. "All by itself," without the farmer's help, "the soil produces corn." There is power in the seed to produce life!

Now you might say, “Hang on a minute, Andy. Jesus isn’t talking about individuals becoming Christians; God’s *Kingdom* is far bigger than that!” And you’d be absolutely right! God’s Kingdom is *far* bigger than individual salvation. But this is how God’s Kingdom primarily grows – by individuals coming to believe in Jesus Christ for themselves and surrendering their lives to him. And God will make the seed of his Kingdom grow once it is planted.

We need to be careful not to get too bogged down by the details in Jesus’ picture. If we equate the farmer with *Jesus*, for example, and try to allegorise all the constituent parts of the parable, then we run into theological difficulties both in *inactivity* of the farmer, and in his *ignorance* of how the seed grows. The point of *this* parable lies not in the intricate details of the picture, but rather in its overall message. Jesus deliberately side-lines the farmer, pronouncing him *inactive*, and emphasising the *automatic* growth of the corn, to make the point that the growth of God’s Kingdom is not in any way dependent upon *human* effort. Rather, it is *God* who makes the seed grow, just as God’s word caused the earth to produce vegetation in Genesis 1. And it is a mystery how he does it.

Likewise, the harvest at the end of the parable is primarily there to complete the picture, and any attempt to identify what Jesus meant by it must be done with a degree of caution, since we have no record of how Jesus explained it. But, drawing from his use of harvest imagery in other parables, it seems likely that he had in mind the Final Judgement at the end of time, when God’s Kingdom on Earth will be fully realised. If so, there may be some lessons to be drawn from the fact that the corn is not harvested until the time is ripe. There are certain things that must happen first, some of which Jesus will outline during the remainder of this Gospel. Principally, the Son of Man (Jesus) must suffer at the hands of the leaders in Jerusalem, he must be killed and three days later must rise again (Mark 8:31; 9:31-32; 10:32-34). Then, also, the disciples must experience persecution (Mark 13:9-13), and the gospel of Jesus Christ must be preached to all nations (Mark 13:10), and so forth.

All of this is essential for God’s Kingdom to grow, and all of it must take place before Jesus comes again to complete the full realisation of that Kingdom on Earth. Yet the Final Judgement may not be the *only* possible understanding of the harvest in Jesus’ parable. What we can say for certain is that the seed of God’s Kingdom *will* germinate to its intended completion. For its germination depends not on human endeavour, which will fail, but on God’s Word, which will never fail. “All by itself the soil produces corn.”

That point is made still stronger by Jesus’ second parable. Again, the important message of this parable is not found in the specific details. We don’t need to look for allegorical understandings of the birds and the branches and so forth. Nor do we need to concern ourselves with the exact scientific accuracy of Jesus’ statements about the size of a mustard seed or of a mustard shrub. Jesus is clearly making a point through hyperbole (or exaggeration). And the mustard plant is ideal for the point he is making. For the seed *is* very small, and from such a tiny seed grows a *large* shrub, not far short of a tree. That’s the point of this parable: the Kingdom of God is like a plant that starts tiny and grows huge! Not only this, but it also grows *rapidly*. And that, says Jesus, is what the Kingdom of God is like.

Now, even a cursory glance at the history of Christianity bears out the truth of Jesus’ claim. The Christian faith began as one tiny human embryo inside Mary’s womb. Of course, prior to this, there were many foreshadowing glimpses into what was to come within Israel’s Scriptures. But Christian faith truly began with the coming of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Then, as he began his adult ministry, he chose just Twelve Apostles and a few others to equip and enable to carry on his mission after his death, resurrection, and ascension back into heaven. At the beginning of the book of Acts, there were only about 120 believers. What might we call that? The first tiny shoots poking through the soil, perhaps? But hardly a movement that was set to change the face of human history right across the world!

Then the Holy Spirit came upon the group at Pentecost, Peter preached, and 120 became about 3,000. A little later a crippled man was healed in Jesus’ name and their number grew to about 5,000. Then the church began to be persecuted and had to spread out to other parts of the Roman world. And, as they went, they preached about Jesus

and people from *other* nations began to be included among God's people. And no matter how hard the Roman Emperors tried to prevent God's Kingdom from growing, more and more people turned to Christ. Eventually, at the start of the Fourth Century, the Emperor Constantine himself laid claim to a Christian faith and proceeded to seek to impose Christian belief on all his subjects. Some argue that this is the point where Christianity began to lose its way, and there may be some truth in that. But what is certain is that it precipitated the even more rapid spread of Christianity across the then known world, as missionaries took the Gospel out to new territories. That practice continues to the present day, such that now, roughly a third of the world's population – nearly two and a half billion people – would identify themselves as Christian.

Furthermore, Christian faith has transformed every area of societies across the globe, from justice systems, to governmental systems, to education, to scientific investigation, to art, to music, to philosophy, to human rights, to public morality, to charity, to liberation from slavery. You name it, the influence of a poor carpenter from Nazareth is felt in every area of life, as people who have owned faith in Jesus Christ have transformed the societies around them for the good of the world at large. "The Kingdom of God is like a [tiny] mustard seed," which "when planted, ... grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants." And we get to be a part of this if we wish to!

So, what part can *you* play in the growth of this Kingdom? Let me take you back to *my* story. Think about the role of my parents in *praying* for me every day, and in living in such a way as to provide me with a Christian moral framework. Is that a part of your calling, whether for your own children or for others? Think about my supply teacher bringing his Christian life-framework to bear on his everyday job. Who knows what influence we might have that we don't even realise? For instance, Andy Kemp shared with me about his recent time working in an estate agents, and how the other staff peppered him with questions about his faith. Seeds have been sown that God can grow! Or think about the role of my brother, sitting down with me every day to read and talk about the Bible together. You know, some people are open to that, and we sometimes forget how powerful it is to open God's word up with people. That's why the Alpha Course has been so successful over the years, and why we are in the process of planning an online Alpha. Could you be a part of that? Could you play the role of my friend who invited me to come along to Church? Or it may be that Alpha is an easier first step – especially as people won't even need to leave their own homes to attend!

There is power in the seed of God's Kingdom! Even the tiniest seed can produce something unimaginably big! Where and how can you sow this seed and watch God make it grow? Never underestimate what God can do through willing, ordinary people, like you and me! Amen?

[Pray]