

## Readings for June 17, 2018

### Ezekiel 17:22-24 (NIV)

<sup>22</sup> “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup> On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. <sup>24</sup> All the trees of the forest will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. “I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.”

### Mark 4:26-34 (NIV)

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

<sup>30</sup> Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> 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.”

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

## “The Kingdom of God is like . . .”

So far in Mark’s gospel, the primary focus has been on what Jesus *did*. He healed people, he exorcised demons, and he made bold claims, like “your sins are forgiven,”<sup>1</sup> claims that got him into trouble with the religious leaders of the day. But what was his basic message and how did he go about delivering it? Mark 4 tells us that Jesus frequently spoke in *parables*. These are memorable stories, usually with a potent meaning, one that would be *explosive* if he were to speak it plainly. Many people who know anything about Jesus associate him with parables, what is often overlooked is that this teaching technique was not uncommon among Jewish rabbis. Some of his stories are so familiar that terms from them have become a part of the English language, like: “good Samaritan” or “prodigal son.”

We like this image of Jesus as a *story-teller*, and many of those stories are to be found in illustrated children’s books. This is, I suggest, both good and bad. Of course it is great that children learn the stories of Jesus from a young age. Nevertheless, this can feed into the common perception that Jesus, like Santa Claus and the Christmas story, is meant for children and Jesus is to be disregarded when we become mature adults. The parables of Jesus are therefore seen as somehow childish, or meant for children.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as adults, we often have a vague memory of the parable from Sunday School but we have forgotten their point or deeper meaning. In the process, we have inadvertently *tamed* the message of Jesus. The fact the stories are memorable is a good thing, but Gospel writers would decry any belittling of their powerful message – they would equate that with spiritual blindness. Mark tells us twice in this chapter that Jesus often said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”<sup>3</sup>

So what is the meaning of these two particular parables? We are not told explicitly; we have to deduce it. Both begin with a question, either explicit or implicit, namely: “What is the kingdom of God *like*?” In using such language, Mark is cleverly echoing words from Isaiah chapter 40. That chapter begins with a voice “crying out in the wilderness,”<sup>4</sup> which Mark has already linked to John the Baptist,<sup>5</sup> and it later poses the question, “With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Mark is pointing to Jesus as being a fulfillment of those messianic hopes of Isaiah and the parables of Jesus reveal what God’s promised rescue of his people will look like. Many Jews at that time were hoping for a dramatic divine intervention, that God would vindicate his people with dire judgment on all their enemies. So a likely question in the forefront of their minds was, “How *could* Jesus’ ministry in Galilee *possibly* be the beginning of the long-anticipated reign of God?” Jesus responds by saying do *not* belittle small beginnings, for that is the way God works.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:5.

<sup>2</sup> The beloved old hymn, *Tell Me The Stories Of Jesus*, even has a simple (childish?) tune. The second verse begins: “First let me hear how the children stood 'round His knee . . .”

<sup>3</sup> Mark 4:9,23.

<sup>4</sup> Isa 40:3.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:2-4.

<sup>6</sup> Isa 40:18, 25.

These two stories, like the earlier better-known parable of the sower,<sup>7</sup> are all based on common agricultural imagery. These are the things the people all knew something about; hear the parable again: “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 grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”<sup>8</sup>

The seed grows “all by itself,” the Greek word means “automatically,” although that should not be understood in an atheistic context, since everyone understood the seed’s growth was a mysterious work of God [alone]. It was simply a *miracle*. Consequently, regardless of the farmer’s skills and knowledge, there remains a significant degree of ignorance and helplessness. The farmer doesn’t *make* seed grow; he doesn’t even understand *how* it grows. In the same way, *we* can’t create kingdom of God, the kingdom is *God’s*. We can frustrate and hinder it, but the *power* behind the kingdom is always *God’s*. The work of God goes on, and nothing in the end can stop *God’s* purposes. In an analogous way, the parable says there is an inevitability to nature’s growth.

Nature’s growth is also imperceptible. That’s why we are fascinated by time-lapsed photography which shows us the growth of the plant happening in a matter of seconds rather than weeks. Sometimes reform takes a long time, and we are *not* very patient! We live in a world that wants things to happen instantly. Nevertheless, nature’s growth is constant. Night and day, even while we sleep, God’s kingdom is continually growing and eventually there *will* be a harvest. There is an old hymn that expresses these sentiments; some of you might know it: “God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year. God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near. Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

The connection between the kingdom of God and the great Day of the Lord is alluded to by the mention of the *sickle*.<sup>9</sup> That final harvest, the Judgement Day which all Jews longed for, was welcomed because then God would put everything to right. The parable ends with the reassurance that God’s promised moment is coming.<sup>10</sup> We are therefore called to be patient, to live in hope, and to be prepared.

So this parable is simply about two things: *the kingdom of God will grow from tiny beginnings and, whatever happens, we are can be certain of a future harvest*. The image of a certain harvest from invisible beginnings promises that even if results of the gospel proclamation appear insignificant, or even fruitless, Christians should be encouraged and not give up. We should have the confidence to

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:1-20.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 4:26b-29.

<sup>9</sup> See Joel 3:13.

<sup>10</sup> The details of that great Day are not spelt out here, but we know from elsewhere in the gospel that it won't look quite like what they were expecting, namely a vindication for Israel and condemnation for those outside. When judgment comes, it will look rather different; but it will come.

keep planting seeds, believing it will produce fruit in God's good time, even though *how* this happens is a mystery we don't understand!<sup>11</sup> Moreover, we plant seeds faithfully, not supposing that *our own efforts alone* will bring about the kingdom – for that is always a work of God.

One of the things we must *not* do is over-analyze a parable, by asking questions such as, “Is the farmer God, or Jesus?” And, “If not, who then?” If we go down that road, we then wonder whether God sleeps on the job, or has a ‘hands-off’ policy in helping the seed to grow. The apparent passivity of the farmer during the growth process does not mean that the disciples should just sit back, do nothing, and wait for God to bring in the harvest. It would therefore be a mistake to conclude that the gift of faith, or the secret of the kingdom of God, can simply be kept private. But we are reminded that human beings cannot control or predict the growth of the kingdom. Now, it is not unreasonable to link the farmer with Jesus.<sup>12</sup> That being the case, the growing seed then represents the fruit of *his* proclamation, namely, the kingdom of God, and the harvest is the great Day of the Lord; but don't read any more into the parable than that. These parables are *not* comprehensive and so do not tell us *everything* about the kingdom of God. But what they do say is, nevertheless, true. So in addition to *not* over-analyzing parables, we should *not* interpret them in a *minimalistic* way, saying: “The kingdom is merely about . . . (this or that).”

The second seed parable uses the imagery of a small, apparently, insignificant seed being transformed into a mature plant. Instead of talking about the harvest, this parable highlights the *function* of the full-grown plant, namely, to provide shelter for the birds to nest on the ground underneath its shade.

The mustard seed is not *literally* the smallest of all seeds; this is simply a proverbial statement, not a lesson in botany. In Galilee, a mustard seed plants can reach a height of about 10 feet and birds would be attracted to them both for the shade and to eat their dark seeds. But there Old Testament connections here too, in that kingdoms of the world were often described as huge trees in which birds perch.<sup>13</sup> (As in the case of our Old Testament reading this morning.) Even so, the irony is that the Kingdom of God is *not* compared to mighty cedar tree, but to a shrub. Moreover, one that was not particularly welcomed by Palestinian farmers, as it had a tendency to take over! It was therefore a nuisance and hard to eradicate once established. The birds, however, welcomed it. It is quite possible that the birds in the parable signify non-Jews, since that is the case in the Old Testament references; if this was deliberate, then this is an added explosive element in a Jewish context! Seen in this light, this image is thus somewhat double-edged. The expected grandeur of a world-tree turns out to look like an invasive weed, and outsiders (non-Jews) even benefit from it.

How might we put this today? Maybe, “The kingdom of God is like a vicious computer virus a man sent out in an email from his computer, and it spread and spread and infected more and more

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<sup>11</sup> The Spirit of God is often likened to an unpredictable *wind*; see John 3.

<sup>12</sup> This is plausible, even very likely, given the proximity of this parable to the earlier parable of the sower.

<sup>13</sup> See Ezek 17:22, 31:1 and Dan 4:10, 21.

computers.”<sup>14</sup> If we heard that, our heads would spin. We’d say, “What? Are you serious? And the people who heard Jesus back then would have reacted the same way. An invasive weed comes in unannounced, popping up very subtly, and it starts to grow. Then another weed pops up. Soon they will be enmeshed with other flowers and plants, and eventually the entire garden would be overtaken by weeds.

While this is not an unreasonable analogy and reflects a shocking element of the parable, we can’t overlook the contrast between the proverbial smallest seed and the surprisingly large size of the resultant shrub. Even so, when fully grown, the kingdom of God will be small compared to majestic trees.<sup>15</sup> Jesus may have told this parable to counter the impression God’s rule had to appear as great and powerful, or that Christ’s followers will dominate the earth. Instead, like the mustard bush, the followers of Jesus are a bunch of ragged folk, full of doubts and fears, who seem to be unable to comprehend much of what Jesus says or does. God’s reign arises in people like this. Yet the end result will be far greater than anyone observing Jesus and his small band the disciples would imagine. The story is another warning *not* to look down upon small beginnings, in this case, Jesus’ Galilean ministry, and of the great work that God was going to do through him. It can also function as a warning for us today, against looking down on small beginnings, when two or three people meet to pray and plan, or a moment of vocation, because that may herald the start of some new great initiative that God has in mind. This is also a word of *encouragement* for us here today and possibly also for some of you in your work and activities. “Don’t worry,” Jesus is saying, “Remember *who* your God is and *what* he has promised. This is a small beginning, but the kingdom will eventually be life-giving to the whole world.”

Finally, both stories also point to God’s generous and undeserved grace. This is such a central Christian idea, and yet it remains so difficult to really accept or believe. As I mentioned a few weeks ago in the context of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3, being “born anew” is a work of the *Spirit*. So it is that seeds grow, seemingly effortlessly, when given the right conditions. And even in harsh conditions, we can be surprised to see an occasional tree or shrub and wonder how it survived. Grace is God’s gift and without it there would be no life at all - and certainly no spiritual life. Too often in our Western Churches, we fail to trust in God’s grace. Instead we fuss over the little seed, dousing it with pesticide, repotting it, clucking anxiously over the amount of sun and water it is receiving. We strive to make the seed grow as if it were *all* about *our* efforts. This doesn’t mean we do nothing, of course, but neither does genuine growth arise from our frenetic good works or as a direct consequence of holding to a particular moral or doctrinal position. The seed germinates and grows because *God* is at work, and we must never lose sight of that. Consequently, there is always an element of hope in the parables. And, at the same time, there is always an element of mystery to the reality of the reign of God that we are a part of by faith. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://katdish.net/2011/03/a-new-understanding-of-an-old-parable/>

<sup>15</sup> In Luke’s version of the parable (Luke 13:18-31) he specifically mentions a “tree” thereby making the OT connection more explicit. Matthew (13:31-32) mentions both a “plant” and a “tree.”