

The kingdom of God and the mustard seed

Talk at St John and St Stephen's on June 16th 2024

It's a real pleasure to have Fraser, Rory, Ben, Zoe and family and friends with us today (and hopefully online as well). And I don't think I could have chosen a better set of Bible readings for Fraser's baptism! I hope this talk will be of some help to you and to all of us in our church today, as we look at the parable of the mustard seed together.

If you are of a certain age, you may remember the primary school science experiment where blotting paper or tissue was used to show the almost miraculous growth of tiny mustard or cress seeds. Many people's interest in gardening began with that first experiment. At its most basic level, the parable of the mustard seed is a picture of the kingdom of God growing from something small and seemingly insignificant into an impressive bush or tree.

Ben and Zoe kindly sent me these photos of Fraser to use today. I think it's fair to say that he's definitely the smallest, and probably cutest, in our congregation today. Nowadays you can find numerous Artificial Intelligence apps that imagine what someone might look like as they grow up (and here's a couple of attempts they made with Fraser). But AI can only take a guess at what he might physically look like in the future. It cannot show his personality or the real essence of who Fraser will become and what amazing things he might do in his life. Here's a much better photo of him taken last week (I think he's destined to become a singer or a comedian from this picture). Like any seed, Fraser will need plenty of nurture and support to thrive and succeed. For many of us here in Reading, we will continue to pray for you all and particularly for Fraser, Rory, Ben and Zoe. But much, of course, will fall on family, godparents and friends to nurture and support Fraser and help him flourish in the future as the family move to Leamington Spa.

There's also encouragement for all of us that God's kingdom can be found in the most unusual of people and places. Time and time again, the Bible uses the smallest of things to show God's kingdom is at work in our world, from the sparrow and the lily to even grains of sand. As one songwriter, Bob Dylan, put it: 'In the fury of the moment I can see the master's hand, in every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.'

In our Old Testament reading today, we heard the story of how the prophet Samuel went to meet all the sons of Jesse, to anoint one as king. One after another, the sons were paraded in front of him, but not one of the seven was right. Instead, they had to search for the youngest one, who'd been considered so insignificant that he'd been left tending the sheep for the family. And this young shepherd, David, went on to become one of the greatest of all kings, as well as a gifted songwriter (and harpists too!)

And for all of us, there's encouragement that even the smallest acts of faith, kindness, love and support that we do can have a profound impact in the future. There's a story often told of a meeting one morning in a small street in Munsieville township in South Africa, where a passing priest Trevor Huddleston respectfully greeted and talked to a young boy and his mother, breaking all social conventions of the time. This small act of kindness led to a long-term mentoring by Trevor Huddleston of the young boy, Desmond Tutu. When Desmond was in hospital with tuberculosis, Trevor would often visit him and continued to support him during his school years. Later, Desmond Tutu and his young wife Nomalizo Leah, called their firstborn Trevor. And later, Archbishop Desmond and Trevor Huddleston campaigned together against apartheid and for the release of Nelson Mandela.

But there's also a very different perspective that we can draw from this parable. Some scholars, like the theologian Paula Gooder, think the mustard seed in the story might be the *salvadora persica* plant. Unlike other mustard seed plants, it does grow swiftly into a large tree. One Roman author and naturalist, born during Jesus' lifetime, was Pliny the Elder. He said of this plant that it was 'extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.' If this is the case, then the parable is not only about growth, but about an invasive plant that can quickly take over a whole field. I was trying to think what our modern equivalent of the mustard seed might be. I didn't have far to look. In our own garden, we recently saw a number of spikes appearing in our grass that looked like this one (*shows bamboo shoot*). In the last few years this is what they have become. In fact, similar plants like the Chinese bamboo can lay dormant for up to five years in the ground before growing up to ninety feet tall. The parable is implying that the kingdom of God is like an invasive plant which, once planted, grows and grows and can rarely be eradicated.

It's so easy to look at the constant wars, violence, inequality and destruction of our earth and feel overwhelmed by the evil that seems all pervading. But this parable reminds us that God's kingdom of love, goodness and kindness is just as pervasive. It won't be stamped out or eradicated.

And the parable goes one step further. A few weeks ago, Jeremy mentioned in his all age talk about the different rules that people in Jesus' times had to follow, some of them completely absurd. One of these rules was to not mix different types of plants together. In this worldview, order represents holiness, and disorder uncleanliness. In Luke's gospel, the parable mentions the mustard seed being sown in a garden, which would have been expressly forbidden by law. For those who first heard Jesus' parable, they would have been shocked by the careless way mustard seed has been mixed in with other plants. And what's worse, the branches of the mustard seed tree are attracting all kinds of birds to settle there. What'll be left of the crops once the birds have eaten them all? As often is the case, Jesus depicts the kingdom of God as a disruptive force, that is

associated with the unclean, the outcast, the insignificant. God's kingdom breaks apart any conventions of what is 'successful' or important and flourishes in the most unexpected of places.

So we can take encouragement today that God's kingdom is not about the mighty and impressive, but is often present in the smallest of things. And we can bring the kingdom of God to people in the smallest of ways: in our acts of kindness, love and care we do each day. As Mother Teresa put it: 'Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.' And we can take hope that the world that Fraser, Rory and others will grow up in will be one where God's kingdom of love and grace and mercy is as tenacious and strong as the evil and violence we see in our world today.

'With what can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' Amen.

Hamish Bruce

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