

Parable of the mustard seed - Matthew 13:31-32 / Mark 4:30-31

'Seek first His Kingdom and his righteousness and this will be given to you as well' - Matthew 6:33

This has been on my mind and I have been trying on and off to understand how to seek the Kingdom. Jesus spoke about it a lot.

We need to delve into what this means, how do we seek the Kingdom? What is the Kingdom?

To me this verse was one that I remember from childhood and Sunday school. It felt easy to understand and I was taught that it meant that big things will come out of small things. Well this is true and this is what this verse says, and we will look into this, but I was challenged to look into this verse more deeply from a passing comment in a book I read that got me thinking. There is a lot to be learnt about the Kingdom from this simple verse. I've been dwelling on it for a while now and I think I have only just begun to scratch the surface.

One thing that we miss out on is the context that this, and other sayings of Jesus, were taught in. This verse is full of meaning that would have been obvious to Jesus' Jewish audience that passes us by. So let's unpack some of the imagery in this verse...

Jesus tells us of a man who took a mustard seed and planted it in his field. Now to us there is nothing peculiar about this; however, to the Jewish audience this would have been quite controversial straight away to talk of the Kingdom of Heaven like this. It is actually shocking.

The main reason was that a man would not plant a mustard seed in his field, for 2 reasons : firstly because it was forbidden by Jewish law and secondly it was forbidden because it is was considered a weed. So Jesus is comparing the Kingdom to an illegal weed. If we are to bring this up to date and try to find a comparison for how shocking this statement was it is not far off using a cannabis plant as an analogy. I am not saying the Kingdom is like a drug but I am trying to give some indication of the immediate effect that this statement would have had. It would have had people falling off their chairs. It is an interesting choice of analogy for Jesus to use and he knew exactly what he was doing.

I picture a conscientious disciple pulling Jesus aside and saying 'Jesus you can't say things like that. People will be offended! What's wrong with a nice rose bud, people like roses.' you can just see it, and perhaps we still do sometimes - how concerned are we about offending people? We will see from other parts of Jesus' teaching that sometimes the first thing it does is offend us.

The truth is that the Jewish people didn't want a rose bud, and they certainly didn't want a mustard plant. Remember this is a sensitive time in the Israelites' history, they were waiting for the Messiah. They are down trodden, depressed but hopeful. They look back to the glory days and crave the future with the Israel Nation glorious again. They wanted a cedar tree. The Pharisees, the Jewish people were holding to scriptures including those from Daniel and Ezekiel that compare God's Nation to be like the cedar of Lebanon, (and

it will be) they wanted a strong and mighty Kingdom, a ruler that would expel the Romans. They were looking for a revolution of force, like the days of the Judges. A mustard seed just wasn't going to cut it. So not only was this verse shocking it was also an insult, the concept of the Kingdom they were hoping for as a weed was not a welcome one.

So this parable goes down like a lead balloon as soon as it starts. Jesus was provocative, some people will have switched off straight away. They will have had concrete views of How God should act. At one point Jesus talks about not putting new wine into old wine skins but using new wine skins. Those who were set in their thinking and thought they knew how the Kingdom was going to come were not the new wineskins Jesus was aiming for, and they were left behind.

God's people are called to be flexible. God will move, lets not be rigid.

So we have an idea of the context of this verse, lets unpack it.

Firstly this verse is prophetic for the spread of the Church from a small movement of 11 disciples and other followers into a world religion. We're not going to go into Church history but if we did we would see how it has spread and the amazing impact that that has had. Jesus was a prophet and this is a wonderful prophesy of the Kingdom's growth. We can see from the past that every aspect that we are going to be looking at, illegality, undercover growth, weeds, have been how the Church has grown. What is also therefore true is that we need to pay attention to this if we are going to see the Kingdom grow in us and through us.

Why did Jesus choose a mustard seed? I believe that the 2 immediate reasons were that it is an illegal weed, there is a lot to learn about the Kingdom in that, and how the mustard plant actually grows and what impact it has on the garden.

It is a weed. Here is a clue to the intended movement of the Church that I believe the western church doesn't have much experience of. We are supposed to be weeds to the World. Remember what Paul said - to some we are the smell of death to others the fragrance of life. The persecuted Church knows all about this, they are weeds to the world around them, but when was the Church in England a weed to the World around us? That's a real challenge. When were we last standing against the world and being a pest? Jesus was a weed to the rulers and establishments of this world, hence they killed him. Are we? In the countries where the Church is persecuted they are seeing miracles and God moving in the amazing ways. They are defying the world around them and being a thorn in their side. They know God in their suffering. Are we too cosy with the world here in the west?

A stark warning is what A. W. Tozer said :

'Religion today is not transforming people; rather it is being transformed

by the people. It is not raising the moral level of society; it is descending into society's own level, and congratulating itself that it has scored a victory because society is smiling accepting its surrender'

They are some strong words, and I am not trying to condemn anyone, but as a whole body we need to seriously consider this warning. we need to pay attention to it. Remember the helpful Disciple syndrome - You can't say that people will be offended.

What should we be doing as weeds? Where is our place in growing the Kingdom like a mustard seed? I am not advocating any kind of war or violence, offending for the sake of it or going for shock tactics,. But we have a gospel that convicts people of sin and that is not always welcome, remember that Jesus did warn that the World will hate us, why? Because we preach the truth no matter who it will offend. I think the reason is that we should be the World's moral conscience. We should be hated because we recognise Sin and won't let it go. We should be hated because we can demonstrate how this life should be lived in fellowship with each other and God.

I spend a lot of my day offending people because it is my job to point out offensive behaviour in them. To challenge their beliefs and actions. In a lot of ways to challenge sin. They may dislike me for doing it and they may be offended but only because they know that it is true. I am not going to be offended by something that is not true, neither is the world, and that is why we offend them. We proclaim the truth, and if they accept it, it will set them free. If they don't we represent death.

The world moves fast, so fast that it leaves people in its wake, it abuses the poor for wealth. Another way that we are and could be weeds is to stand up against this trend, to seek justice. Mike had a good point recently about righteous anger being when you are angry on another's behalf because of the way others have been treated. I think that this is relevant. When was the last time the Church truly stood up for Justice? Or against oppression? I believe that by highlighting the injustice in the world we are truly a weed and hurting it where it hurts, the wallet.

So a challenge is - are we weeds? If not, if we are not hated, why not?

The interesting thing about mustard seeds is that it is now planted on purpose and is an accepted plant. This is another angle of the prophetic in this verse, Mustard is now a managed weed. Did Jesus foresee a Church managed by the law? We have this image of an illegal seed, but the Church is very soon going to be managed by laws such as the religious hatred law. Now what would happen if we truly proclaimed the Gospel, regardless of the law, stood up against injustice and became a weed. How long until we are hated, how long until we are put in prison? The Church in the West has forgotten its roots. The Gospel didn't come out of the heights of the Roman Courts, it came out of its prison cells.

It has been oppressed, legislated against and attempted to be managed since it began. Why are we comfortable with the world now? What's changed?

Shane Claiborne comments that

'In eras of injustice prison becomes the Christian's home. So live real good, and get beat up real bad. Dance until they kill you, and then we'll dance some more'

I would say that it is not just periods of injustice but whenever the Gospel is not welcome. That challenges me. Am I willing to go to prison? Am I willing to die?

Jesus said - Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, whoever loses his life will preserve it.

Where the Church is a weed it is thriving and a lot of the leaders are imprisoned for their faith. As the Church in the west we are very comfortable, I am worried that the world manages us as a weed. How long will we let this happen. I suspect with new legislation dawning the prophetic element of this parable will be realised in the West as it is around the world. We will be persecuted in one way or another. We need to be ready for this.

There is another aspect about the legality of the mustard seed that we need to consider. It was illegal, but it was illegal by way of customs and traditions rather than actual law. I have been challenged to take a good look at myself and realise that I have made rules for myself that have bound my usefulness in the spreading of the Kingdom.

The first part of this parable is that the man plants the seed. Nobody would have planted a mustard seed, hence this is an unconventional act and this makes me think of a friend of mine called Bob. Bob is one of those Christians that does not belong on planet Earth. I spent a lot of time with him through my time studying and he was the kind of guy who would walk up to the biggest hardest looking guy in the room and tell him that Jesus loves him. I would cringe, I would be embarrassed. To be honest I am ashamed by my embarrassment now. Bob does a lot of unconventional things, Bob is ready to be used by God. He does not belong on Planet earth because he is kingdom focused. I have learnt a lot from him.

But this is a challenge for us as individuals as well as us as a Church. What about us, what traditions or ways of doing things, or things that should not be done are actually restricting the growth of the Kingdom. **Has the Church legislated within herself against the Kingdom?** Let's not be restricted by 'the way things are always done' or 'how it should be' instead lets be open to God and abandon our substitute laws. Remember 'it was for freedom that Christ has set us free'.

I love the Church, she is beautiful. I think that the Church has done some amazing things. It is my family, and I think we do a lot of things right, and a lot of what we do is unconventional, praise God. However, when looking at the Church as a whole, and some churches I have visited, I am concerned by 2 trends that I see in the Church today that I think do not fit the vision of the Kingdom we have in this verse. We need to be wary of these.

One recent trend I have recognised in the Church that I worry about is forming the Church into another business or organisation. It is popular for Churches to borrow business terms and structures when speaking about ourselves. We have '5 year plans', 'organisational structures', 'strategy plans', one Church I know has contracts for all those involved. The Kingdom that Jesus taught was not like a business, it was not a good business plan. Things like paying all the workers a full days wage even if they started at 4:30 is not good business sense. Yet we are moving the Church to become like a business. I was speaking to a friend who was telling me about the fact that his church actually have a planning committee to decide on the new Church logo! We need to be careful we are growing a Kingdom that's not of this world, not one that is, not a franchise! We are not in competition with the world and we are not an organisation, we are a family and a church.

The other trend I have recognised is the culture focused Church. I have been to a lot of Churches that are aimed at the culture of the day and that want to be as relevant to the trends and cultures of the day as possible. We have something that is relevant to people, the gospel. The more I work with people the more I am convinced that this world needs God. Also that this world needs the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. They need the Church. This world has absolutely nothing to offer them! Nothing. We have everything Yet we feel that we need to dress the gospel up, to make it relevant. I believe that when we stop being concerned with how we are seen and live the kingdom as outlined in the parables of Jesus people will flock to the Church. People will see the light in the church, they will recognise something of God and be drawn to it. Not by the dressing but by the Gospel.

Dean William Inge said that

*The Church that marries the spirit of an age
becomes a widow in the next'*

So let us be open to God's movement and seek the Kingdom, not try and do it ourselves and potentially bind the kingdom. Lets not fall into these traps and try and re-package the kingdom depending on the world. The further away from the World we are the better.

So what are we to learn about the Kingdom from this, how should we grow? We've looked at some dangers, but what should we be doing?

A mustard plant has an individual way of growing apparently. It does start as a small seed. As a nothing in the eyes of the World. Jesus says it will grow to being a tree. This is interesting. Mark says it will grow into the largest plant but Matthew says a tree. I think both make sense but apparently a mustard seed does not grow into a tree, it is a shrub. It is up for debate what this is about, and people have searched for mustard plants that grow into trees, and believe me you can find lots of debate on this, but I suspect what Jesus is saying is that it will grow and not be confined by our understanding as to what it will or should become. It will grow and it will be in God's hands where it goes and what

it becomes. The Kingdom will grow beyond our understanding and our wildest dreams.

A mustard seed grows by spreading under all of the other plants. What it does is it spreads so far unseen until it covers under the garden. This is why Jewish gardeners hated it, it just took over, no matter what you did, it went where it wanted to go. It works in small steps with small seeds to slowly but surely take over the garden, unnoticed, from underneath. Each flower on the plant can produce thousands of seeds. The potential of each 'member' is incredible. This is in direct contrast to the Cedar tree image the Jews had. The cedar tree grows straight up, towering over the garden and grows more or less by itself, it does not spread, it just grows. We talked last week about not despising the day of small things. And that is absolutely right, as this is how the Kingdom grows! Small victories, not world defining events every day, but by the day to day struggle of Christians. It is amazing. This is the choice of analogy Jesus uses. It is a quiet revolution! The kingdom will spread and the World will have no idea what has hit it!!! But it will spread through our efforts, God will use us .

There is also a need to explore the Bible and the way in which God has worked out his plan through out history. Eugene H Peterson points us to compare the start of Exodus with the start of Mark's gospel to look at who God uses in History. The whole Bible is testimony to this parable but the passage in Exodus starts with 2 women, not what you would expect, let alone 2 slave women as the Israelites were. These women are named Miriam and Zipporah where as the Pharaoh is not, God is interested in those the world is not, the smallest seeds not the biggest. These women go on to defy a decree and in doing so save Moses' life and this results in the freedom of the Israelites and the start of the Salvation plan. This plan comes to completion in Jesus. The start of Mark has 2 women, Mary and Elizabeth, who again defy a decree and allow God's work to spread the new Kingdom through Jesus. Both instances are the way a mustard seed Kingdom works, they obey God's rule not man's and they spread as a result. There are many more examples but this study deserves some thought when you have time.

So what does this understanding of how the Kingdom grows affect us? It's exciting!

What does this mean to us as a Church, to our communities?

We need to be that quiet revolution. We must stand for God's laws. We have got a lot of press for standing against the world's decided morals, such as homosexuality, and if we are not careful we will be defined by what we appear to hate, rather than what we stand for. I would love to see headlines moaning about the Church demanding Justice, or equality. There have been times when the Church has surfaced from growing underneath, think of Martin Luther King, there was a Christian demanding Justice. See how that seed spread. Let's be the church that does that. If we were to do this I believe that we would see the Gospel spread like never before and I believe we would see more prisons than they can build for us. Do we stand for Justice and equality. Do we lead this by example?

However, where some would say that we must be continually involved in the affairs of

this world, the bible tells us that we are to be strangers to this world. This is not our home and we are not to be conformed to this world. We need to be Christ like in our communities. He is coming back for a spotless bride. I believe that when we truly love each other the impact that that will have on the world will be amazing. I believe that when the Church is spotless she will be a haven for Justice, peace, mercy, equality and love. We will be a community regardless of the World, and it will hate us, but I believe that people will come to the Church as it will be a refuge from the World. On thing that we need to accomplish this is Unity. Let's stop the division in the church, lets create the Kingdom in our churches and communities. Let's be total strangers to this world and they will see something different in us. Let's show them how it should be done.

I long to se the Church become somewhere that people are in awe of because it models the new way of living. It will be the first place people think of when they need help, rather than one of the last. I long to see the people I meet in the depths of despair know that they need to seek the Church as it is the only place they will find God.

This verse is very similar to another verse - Jesus liked his mustard seeds. Remember that faith too is like a mustard seed. The Kingdom will spread by our faith. This is very easy to say but what does it actually mean? I think that the verse that links these parables is in James where he tells us that faith without deeds is dead. Hard stuff, especially when it comes to this Kingdom's growth through faith. God has not only saved us, he has left the Kingdom in our hands to spread. we are to go and make disciples of all the world. We are not alone but we need to act on our faith.

There is the old Franciscan saying - Preach the Gospel always and if necessary use words.

Our very actions and lives and witnesses by how we live.

We need to grow beneath the surface, not on top of it, we are not going to take over, we are not going to conquer the culture of the age, rather we are going to be the constant below the surface that spreads the truth.

Maybe once we step out and act on our faith we will see the miracles we are longing for. Maybe when we are seeking first the Kingdom of God in this way we won't need to worry anymore as the verse in Matthew says. God will give us what we need and at the moment, in the rich west we don't need much.

Be encouraged by this verse also, as a really important thing to note is that God doesn't just use weeds, he chooses them! The Kingdom is built through them! God does not use the Cedar tree because he has chosen the smallest, the weed, that which has been ignored. He uses us. He can use the lowliest seed, he can use the least of us. The World will continue to uplift the strong, the handsome, the rich. God will use the weeds as he sees the heart.

It is worth dwelling on this view of weeds now, just for a moment as there are warnings

here and things we need to pray against. We've considered some traps the Church falls into but something of note is that the world doesn't just try to manage weeds, it tries to kill them.

There are 3 methods of killing weeds that are eerily relevant. And we're just going to mention them for now.

1) Cultural.- The idea is to grow crops around the weeds that will either grow above the weeds and shadow them from any sunlight, or that will strangle them. Hence killing them. The World is full of distractions. Things that will grow up and shade us from God's word, or that will pull us away. Culture allures us and can separate us from God. We need the Church and we need each other. If we are growing together as a mustard plant does we will survive, but this is where those outside, on their own risk everything. Keep pursuing the things of God and don't be distracted.

2) Mechanical - This is sad! The idea here is that you attack the young weeds by digging them up by the roots, thus killing the weeds and stopping the plant spreading. Pray for our youth, and those new in Christ as they will be targeted to be dug up by their roots. I know that of all the people I grew up in the Church with only a handful are still following Christ. We have a few young people - pray for them, support them.

3) Chemical - This is what we hear of in the persecuted Church. This is the mass extermination. This is what we risk if we dare to be weeds. This has happened from Herod to Saul to Indonesia today and many other countries. Leaders will try and stamp out the Church. But it will grow under cover. like a mustard plant. Let's pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters, and let's do what we can to help them.

The Church in the west is vulnerable to these, as well as being tamed as we've seen. Let's be aware of this, especially in today's political climate.

So what are we to do now? How do we create this community. One of my favourite quotes is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who says that

*'The person who loves their dream of Community
will destroy community, but the person who loves those
around them will create community'*

I believe this is also the key to not fall into the trap of tradition. Love each other not the dream of Community, not the static vision.

We are to love one another, so much that we will not only love, but we will give, we will not only give but we will support, we will not only support but we will stand up for each other and those around us.

There is one more part of this passage. This is the fact that the shrub/tree will grow so large that the birds of the air will perch in its branches. Looking at Daniel the birds will

more than likely have represented the gentile nations to the Jewish listeners. Jesus was prophesying again that the Kingdom would grow and encompass and welcome the Gentile nation. This would again provoke his audience. So this parable is quite extreme from start to finish when we understand it. Let's be aware that the Kingdom will grow to encompass those who we may not expect also.

Mustard plant or Cedar tree? What we need to do is be honest with ourselves, because sometimes we can fall back into expecting the Kingdom to grow like the Cedar tree. Do we want to be in control? Are we hoping for a straight forward authoritative kingdom that rules? That is not what is described through this verse. Apparently we are moving into post Christendom. I do not pretend to understand this fully but I think for a time we have been expecting a Cedar tree kingdom, we have thought that the Church is in control in this country. But The Govt will not suddenly change to seek the Kingdom. Culture will not suddenly change. We will always be counter culture and opposed to governments. Just like Jesus was. We have a revolution in our hands. It begins with a seed.

Ezekiel 17:24 says :

*'All the trees of the field 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'*

The tall tree's are the rulers and trends of this age. God will bring them down and build up the small tree, the mustard tree, his church. It is going to happen, it has been prophesied, but I don't think that it will happen before a struggle and some difficult times for us.

I bet the Israelites knew this verse. They misinterpreted it, we have Jesus' teachings and this verse to understand what he means - be encouraged. He will grow our small efforts if they are for the Kingdom.

Lets be Church, lets show the world how to live, lets be this new creation, and the bride of Christ.

Remember that to some we are the smell of death but we are the fragrance of salvation to those who would be saved! Let's let God use us. Lets be weeds, let's be controversial, let's be a quiet revolution.

Chris Burnett