

TWO PARABLES OF JESUS ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, 2021
Mark 4:26-34

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before, Mark 4:26-34: ²⁶**Then He said: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and should sleep and get up, by night and by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, although he does not know how. ²⁸All by itself the ground produces grain, first the green blade, then the head, and then the full wheat in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ready, he puts in the sickle, because harvest has come.”**

³⁰**Then He asked, “To what are we to compare the kingdom of God, or with what parable are we to present it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when it is sown on the ground, is a very small seed among all the seeds on earth. ³²Nevertheless, when it is sown, it comes up and becomes the largest of all the garden plants. It produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can make their dwelling under its shade.”**

³³**He used many parables like these to speak the Word to them, as they were able to hear it. ³⁴He did not speak to them without using a parable. However, in private He used to explain everything fully to His disciples.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are many people who, while not being church-going people, will readily admit that Jesus was a great teacher and who think they have a rather good handle on what Jesus said and taught. So, for instance, they’ll be able to quote such words as, “*Stop judging, that you may not be judged,*” (Matt. 7:1), and they’ll know, “*Love your neighbour as yourself*” (Mark 12:31), or “*Turn the other cheek*” (Matt. 5:39). Perhaps they may know a few other phrases, too, thinking they have a good understanding of what Jesus was all about. They are convinced they’d just be wasting their time if they were to actually read from the Bible or actually go to church and sit through an entire service “with all those hypocrites” that are sure to be there. We probably all know people like that.

So did Jesus. At times large crowds flocked to Him and followed Him around. They would come for a variety of reasons: some to be healed of diseases and other ailments, some to see if what they’d heard about Him was true, and some, most likely, would come to listen to Him speak because they were told that He was a powerful preacher - as indeed He was, but most of them did not stay with Jesus. They’d get a little exposure and perhaps think to themselves that Jesus was someone special, but that would be it. Our Gospel lesson says Jesus “**used many parables... to speak the Word to them, as they were able to hear it.**” No doubt, the vast majority of people who heard Him speak went home suitably impressed with what they had heard but without the slightest idea what He was talking about. It was only His disciples - the people who stayed with Him all the time - that got the inside scoop and the key to understanding His parables.

That is a large part of why we are here today. We don’t want to be counted among those who only think they *know* what Jesus taught. No. We are His disciples. By definition, a disciple is a student: someone who is learning. It’s someone who has the humility to recognise that “I don’t know it all,” and in the case of a Christian disciple, who wants to sit at the feet of Jesus like Mary¹ and listen to Him because Jesus does know it all. We should never lose sight of the fact that we are all students - we are all the disciples of Jesus.

With that in mind, we have before us this morning two short parables of Jesus about the kingdom of God that have an agricultural theme. They are both about growth. This is especially fitting because we are now in the season after Pentecost - the time of the Church Year when we focus on growing in Christian faith and virtue. Therefore, since we are to be growing, we ought to hear what Jesus has to say about how it’s done.

Jesus says, “**The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and should sleep and get up, by night and by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, although he does not know how. ²⁸All by itself the ground produces grain, first the green blade, then the head, and then the full wheat in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ready, he puts in the sickle, because harvest has come.**”

¹ Luke 10:39

In this short parable, we have the Lord's overall master plan. Starting with an empty field, He makes an investment in it by scattering the seed, which grows in the field of its own accord, finally coming to fruition, and then He reaps the harvest - which, one hopes, is much greater than the original investment.

He who plants is the Lord Himself. The seed is His Word. The ground is us. What we immediately see is that the Lord is active on two levels: first, He is the One who prepares the field and scatters the seed of His Word; and second, it is His Word that does the work in the soil. The soil itself is entirely passive throughout. Without the seed, it's just lifeless dirt. It's God's Word, which is living and active,² that brings life to the otherwise dead soil.

This reminds us of the days of creation when the Lord began by creating the heavens and the earth, but "*the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep*" (Gen. 1:2). God wanted to change it. He wanted to improve it, and the way He did that was by speaking to it. Every time He says something, the earth responds. It goes from darkness to light, from being empty and dead to being filled with life all by the power of God's Word. The same is true of us. We come into this world spiritually dark, empty, chaotic, and dead in sin, but the Lord in His infinite love and mercy doesn't want to leave us that way. He wants to bring us light, filling us with goodness and life, making us productive for Him, so He begins to speak to us. He plants in us the seed of this Word, and *all by itself*, His Word in us springs to life and grows.

Where Jesus speaks of the man who plants and "**does not know**" how the seeds sprout and grows, the reference is to the human agent through whom the Lord spreads the seed of His Word. I'm sure the Lord knows precisely how His Word does its job; the point is, we don't. When we baptise an infant or share the Gospel message with someone who hasn't heard it, we can't actually *see* the internal process through which the Word creates the life of faith, yet we know that it happens. In time we are able to see the results, but we don't make the seed germinate. All we can do is spread the seed and agree with Paul, who writes to the Corinthian Church that "*God gives the growth*" (1 Cor. 3:7).

What we can do is do our best to make sure that the seed we plant is the best seed available. You get what you sow. If you plant only God's Law, you produce legalists who believe they can work their own way to salvation. If you plant only God's Gospel, that is, His infinite love and patience, you end up with people who are secure in their sins and who see no need to repent. But if you want Christians who have a living faith in their Saviour, you must plant Christ. You must plant Jesus Christ, God's own Son, sent into this world to become one of us to save sinners, who then suffered, died, and rose again to reconcile us to God and give us life. That's what we have to plant, and we have to keep on planting it. Then we let God do His work.

However, sometimes this can be frustrating. After all, we all know people who are unbelievers, and we'd like nothing more than for them to come to faith in Jesus and receive the gift of forgiveness and life in Him. Yet all we can do is plant the seed. At that point, it's out of our hands. We can't make it germinate and grow. It often happens that it doesn't, which makes us feel terrible on account of the person who remains unconverted and makes us think that we've only wasted our time and effort. But this is the wrong way to look at it. Again, we aren't able to see what's going on in the heart and mind of someone who hears the Word. Yet we do know that the Word of Christ is the only thing in that person that is living and active and that it's doing something in there beneath the soil even if we can't see it. It may be springing to life - only to then be immediately poisoned and killed by a hostile host. Or perhaps it's one of those seeds that just takes an extra long time to germinate. We don't know - and it serves no good purpose for us to worry about it. Instead, we take comfort in knowing that by sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and faithfully keeping on with the planting by bearing witness to Him that we are doing all we are able to do and that the Lord is indeed working through His Word to accomplish the goal He has in mind.

That is the main thrust of the first parable: it is about the power of God's Word to bring people to faith and life in Christ.

The second parable is about just how surprisingly powerful that Word is. Jesus said that the kingdom of God "**is like a mustard seed, which, when it is sown on the ground, is a very small seed among all the seeds on earth.** ³²**Nevertheless, when it is sown, it comes up and becomes the largest of all the garden plants. It produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can make their dwelling under its shade.**"

This is a parable of proportion. You'd never guess that by looking at a tiny mustard seed that could grow into such a large plant, and yet that's exactly what it does. So it is with the kingdom of God. Kingdoms of men rise and fall. They grow from the dreams and conquests of ambitious men, they have their day of glory in the sun, and then they are either conquered by enemies who are stronger, or they fade away and decline due to incompetence, apathy, overindulgence, immorality, or a

² Hebrews 4:12

combination thereof. Not so the kingdom of God. It started with one Man, a very humble Man who never wrote any books, never led an army in battle, and never ruled over an earthly kingdom, mighty or otherwise. Instead, He grew up poor in a backwater place. He had a public ministry that lasted barely three years before He was killed in the most horrible and humiliating way imaginable, before being buried in a borrowed tomb.

Think how many people believed in Him on that Sabbath day He spent in the tomb. Yet the Seed, so to speak, had been planted. Three days later, it sprang to life. Jesus appeared to His disciples, who became believers in what He had accomplished by His death and resurrection. He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures so that they could see and understand that this was God's plan all along. Fifty days later, on Pentecost, 120 of His followers had gathered to celebrate His victory, where the Holy Spirit came upon them, empowering them to be His witnesses. That day the number of believers grew to about 3000.³ This number kept increasing as St. Paul and the other apostles headed off on mission trips to spread the seed of God's Word and expand His kingdom. Though the Empire of Rome repeatedly tried to stamp it out, it only grew stronger under persecution. Seeing the futility of trying to fight it, Rome declared a truce early in the fourth century, granting Christianity the status of a legal religion in the empire. By the end of that century, it was the official religion of Rome. Rome has long since fallen, as have many other kingdoms of men. Still, the kingdom of God continues to grow and expand as strong as ever, so that the "**birds of the sky**" - a reference to people of every nation, culture, and race - continue to "**make their dwelling under its shade**" - the safety and security of knowing Christ Jesus as Saviour and King.

That's the most obvious interpretation of the parable, but the same surprising potential for growth that the Word of God has in the world at large is also attainable in the life of each and every individual Christian. Just as the kingdom of God grows around us, it can grow *in us* as we continue to receive more and more of Christ's powerful Word one tiny mustard seed's measure at a time. It won't hurt either to weed out the many sins that interfere with our spiritual growth and ensure that we water and fertilise the Word we receive with repentance, prayer, praise, and thanksgiving so that the life of faith in us grows to its full potential. That's vital, but it's essential to see that faith in Christ is not an end in itself. The Lord isn't planting His Word in us simply to make us believers in Him any more than a farmer plants wheat because he wants to watch the plants grow. No. The farmer plants because he hopes to harvest something. So it is with the Lord. He wants us to *bear the fruits* of faith, among which are kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and self-sacrificial love. He continues to plant His Word in us, during our daily devotions, our time together here on Sundays and in Bible studies, so that the cycle of planting, growing in faith, and harvesting the fruit of faith can continue until at last the final harvest comes. Jesus says, "**As soon as the grain is ready, he puts in the sickle, because harvest has come.**" The Lord will send His angels to put in the sickle for good. That's what Paul is talking about in today's Second Reading,⁴ where He speaks of these bodies we have now as tents - just temporary dwellings for our souls that will one day be planted like a seed in the ground. But when it's called to life again by the power of God's Word, it will spring forth as a new and incorruptible heavenly dwelling in which we shall be forever with the Lord.

Knowing that this is the final goal, we are always confident⁵ as we wait here below. We continue this process of planting the Word, growing in faith in Christ, and harvesting the righteous fruit of faith, as we always seek to please Him who is doing this gracious work in and for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we praise You for creating all things by Your power, and for sustaining the earth and all who live on it. Let us never forget Your witness to Yourself in Your creation.

Father, we praise You for revealing Yourself to us in Your Word, and for showing us Your holy will. We thank You for the inspired writers of Your wise and true Word, for through them You have shown us Your forgiving love and given us rich promises that give us hope. We praise You for Your grace in Christ Jesus, by which You have provided us our escape from Your judgment on our disobedience. Pour out Your Spirit on us so that we may grow in knowing You.

We praise You for leading us from death to life through the sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Your Son. By Your love for us, move us to love You and those about us with a love that isn't mere words, but that is real and active. Give

³ Acts 2:41

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:1-17

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:6

us sympathetic hearts for those in need, that we may share with them the things You have given us. Grant that through our love they may learn to know Your love and praise You.

We thank You that You have prepared salvation for all people, and that through the Gospel You invite all to Your kingdom. Give us opportunities to pass on Your invitation to salvation to people whom we meet in our lives, that they also may respond to Your mercy with thankful hearts. Send forth Your messengers into every corner of our world, so that the lost may rejoice in Your mercy.

Almighty Lord, guide all to whom You have given authority in our country. Bless our society with pure motives, noble goals, and moral strength. Give all Australians the desire to live before You in loving trust and obedience.

Bless our homes, and make them places of true learning and love, that all who live in them may find peace and joy in harmony with You and with one another.

We pray for Your special protection and help for the sick, the sorrowful, the aged, and the lonely. We pray especially for those in our congregation who are unwell. Comfort all who have suffered material loss, and the loss of dear ones. Meet their needs with Your mercy, and show them the wonderful things You have prepared for all Your children. Father, hear our prayers, and if there is anything else we should have asked for, grant it for the sake of Jesus Christ, who has saved us, and pleads for us. Amen.

The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 17:22-24

²² This is what the Lord GOD has said: "I Myself shall take one of the highest sprigs of a cedar-tree and set it out. I shall pluck off one of the topmost of its tender twigs and I Myself shall plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ I shall plant it on the mountain-height of Israel. It will send out branches, produce fruit and become a magnificent cedar-tree. Every bird, every winged creature, will live under it. They will live in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ Then all the trees in the field will know that I am the LORD and that I have brought the high tree down low. I have made the low tree grow high. I have made the fresh tree wither and have caused the dry tree to sprout. I am the LORD. I have spoken, and I shall do it."

2 Corinthians 5:1-17

¹ For we know that, if the earthly tent in which we live is demolished, we have a house from God, not made by human hands, eternal in heaven. ² To be sure, in this dwelling we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling that is from heaven, ³ since, after we have put it on, we shall not be found naked. ⁴ For we, who are in this tent, groan as we are weighed down, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to put on the additional clothing, that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ God is the One who has prepared us for this very thing and who has given us the Spirit as the guarantee. ⁶ Therefore, we are always confident. We know that, while we are at home in this body, we are in a strange land, away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident and even prefer to move out of the body and to be at home with the Lord. ⁹ Now, whether we are at home or in a strange land, we aspire to please Him. ¹⁰ We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or bad.

¹¹ Therefore, since we know the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade people. God already knows what we are like, and I

hope that this has also become plain to your consciences. ¹² We are not recommending ourselves to you again but are giving you an opportunity to boast about us. We are doing this that you may answer those who boast about what is outward rather than about what is in the heart. ¹³ For, if we are out of our minds, it is for God. If our minds are sound, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that One has died for all. Therefore, all have died. ¹⁵ He has died for all, that those who live may no longer live for themselves but for Him, who has died for them and has been raised. ¹⁶ Therefore, from now on we do not regard anyone from a human point of view. Although we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, yet now we no longer regard Him in this way. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Look! They have become new!

Mark 4:26-34

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