

**Mark 4:26-32 Sermon Transcript****29/09/24**

Well, if you look around at the world today, things seem out of control.

Whether it's the war in Europe, between Russia and Ukraine. Or the war in the Middle East; which seems to be getting worse by the day. Or whether it's the political unrest, the corruption, and the injustice in many parts of the world. It can feel like things are spiralling downwards.

And many of us, I think, have this same feeling of despair about the church. In many parts of the world, the church really did used to be respected; it was at the centre of our shared national life. And it wasn't all that long ago that most people in Melbourne would be somewhere like here on a Sunday morning. But not any more.

Now, people see the church as a thing of the past; something we've left behind in order to move on to better things. And when people do stop and think about the church today, those thoughts are likely to be critical, condescending, or dismissive.

In many ways, it can feel like our world, and the church, are going backwards. Slowly falling apart at the seams.

And in the midst of all of this, it can be tempting to ask: 'God, what are you doing?' Is this really your world? Are you really in control? Will you really bring about what you have promised to do?

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Well, if you're feeling that way this (morning/evening), then you're not alone. As we turn to Mark 4, I think that this is exactly what Jesus's disciples are feeling.

You see, at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus comes with the announcement that "the Kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). He arrives with the claim that God's rule over all the earth was now being established in him.

And this is something that the whole Old Testament had been anticipating. In Zechariah 14, for example, the prophet looks forward to the day when this kingdom - God's rule - would come. And he describes it in this way:

*"Look, [he says] a day belonging to the Lord is coming when the plunder taken from you will be divided in your presence." (Zechariah 14:1)*

It's a day of rescue and restoration. He says:

*"On that day there will be no light; the sunlight and moonlight will diminish."  
(Zechariah 14:6)*

*"On that day the Lord will become King over the whole earth—the Lord alone,  
and his name alone" (Zechariah 14:9)*

It's a day of complete upheaval. And Zechariah says that on that day:

*"[God's] people will live there [in the land], and never again will there be a curse  
of complete destruction. So Jerusalem will dwell in security" (Zechariah 14:9)*

This, Jesus claims in Mark 1, is what he has brought with his arrival. This kingdom of God has now come with him.

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But as we read on in Mark, things are not quite as impressive as we might have hoped.

You see, Jesus comes, welcoming sinners and tax collectors (Mark 2:16), doing good on the Sabbath day (Mark 2:24), only to be rejected by the religious authorities.

Jesus casts out demons, freeing people from their power, only to be accused of operating under the power of Satan (Mark 3:22).

Jesus's own family comes looking for him, only to let him know that they think he's completely out of his mind (Mark 3:21).

And, after only three chapters, we read that there are people seeking to kill Jesus and remove him from the picture altogether (Mark 3:6).

And so you can imagine the disciples feeling confused and disappointed just like us. They've been told that God is in control. That his rule is being established. But it's not what they see when they look at what's happening around them.

And so they would have been asking: 'God, what are you doing?' Are you really in control? Are you really bringing about all that you have promised?

Is this what it looks like for your kingdom to come?

Well, in our passage this morning, Jesus gives us two parables to teach us about his kingdom. What his rule over all things will be like.

And these two parables, in Mark 4:26-32, are surprising stories. Surprising in what they teach about God's kingdom.

In many ways, they pushed back against the assumptions that Jesus's first disciples had. And they adjust, I think, the expectations that we might have about what God's rule in this world will look like.

And they provide us with comfort. With real assurance, that in the midst of a chaotic world, God knows what he is doing. That Jesus is still in control. And that all things are in his hands.

And so, we're going to look at these two parables this (morning/evening) one at a time, and think about what they teach us about God's kingdom.

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The first story, in verses 26 to 29, is **The Parable of the Growing Seed**.

Like the first parable in Mark 4 - which we looked at two weeks ago - this story involves a farmer, sowing seeds, that grow. And it seems like an ordinary story; drawn from everyday life.

That is, until we take a closer look. And when we take a closer look, this parable becomes a very strange story. And it's that strangeness that teaches us about God's rule - his kingdom.

The first strange part of this story is the man who's scattering the seed.

We read, in verse 26, that he casts out the seed. He scatters it onto the ground. But as we read on, he doesn't really do anything else. He sleeps and rises, night and day. Time goes by. But this man, this farmer, doesn't have much to do with this seed.

Now, I'm not a farmer. My soft and clean hands will tell you that. But even I know that there's much more to farming than just scattering some seed around. But this farmer doesn't do any of it. He doesn't plough the seed into the soil. He doesn't water the seed. He doesn't fertilise the seed. In fact, he doesn't contribute to its growth in any way.

And when the seed does grow, we're told that he's surprised. It says, in verse 27, that when it grows "he doesn't know how". It's all a mystery to him.

And so, this man is a strange farmer. He's clueless. He's fairly uninvolved. And he does nothing beyond putting the seed in the ground in the first place. That's the first strange part of this story.

The second strange part of the story is the seed.

Because this farmer has done next to nothing, it's actually surprising, and strange, that this seed grows. But it does! We read in verse 28 that - without the farmer's help - this seed becomes a blade, then a head, and then a head full of grain.

And again, this growth is strange. We're not told anything about the conditions - the sunshine or the rain, or about the kind of soil that the seed was in. We're simply told that this seed produces a crop all "by itself".

Now, the word used for "by itself" is the Greek word that we get "automatic" from. And so the growth of this seed is a little bit like me driving in my car. I don't know how to drive a manual. I can't really be bothered learning. So when I drive, the car just changes gears, all by itself. It's a mystery to me. And I do nothing.

And it's the same picture with this seed. One moment it's in the ground, and the next it's grown into a full crop, ready to be harvested. And it happens all on its own.

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And so, Jesus tells us this parable about a strange and clueless farmer. And about a surprisingly powerful seed. But does this story teach us about God's kingdom? About his rule in this world?

Well, Jesus doesn't give us an interpretation here, like he did earlier in Mark 4. And that's because he expects us to think it through ourselves.

And so here are some things I think The Parable of the Growing Seed teaches us about God's kingdom.

Firstly, this parable teaches us God's rule grows slowly but certainly.

You see, a seed sown into the ground takes time to grow. And that growth takes place in small and imperceptible changes. It's like watching the grass grow. And it's the same, Jesus says, with God's kingdom.

Instead of coming all at once, in one almighty hit, God's rule will extend bit by bit, growing slowly over time. It will grow incrementally, as people come to live their lives under the rule of Jesus the king.

But whilst the growth is slow, it's also certain. You see, if a seed is sown into the ground, in the right conditions, then it will grow. That's what seeds do. They germinate, they bear fruit, and they lead to a harvest.

And again, it's the same with God's kingdom. Like the seed, God's rule will grow. It will move from stage to stage. Always going forward. Never moving backwards. All the way until the harvest.

God's kingdom, just like the growth of the seed, is slow but certain.

Secondly, this parable shows us that God's rule is often a mystery to us. It's something beyond our understanding. And beyond our control or influence.

We are like the farmer in the story. We sow the seed. We share the gospel. But we have no idea what that word will do. And, actually, we have no control or influence over what results will come. Like the farmer, we scatter the seed, and then we leave the rest to God.

Often, we like to think that we have a bit more influence than that. We think that if we're bold enough, or persuasive enough, then people will place their trust in Jesus. But that's not what this parable says. On the other, we might think we're so unpersuasive, or we're inarticulate, that no one would believe the gospel because of us. Again, this parable challenges that way of thinking.

In the parable, the seed grows by itself. All of the power is in the seed - in the word. Our job, like the farmer, is just to scatter this seed. To share the gospel with anyone and everyone who will listen. And God will do the rest.

In God's kingdom, the extension of his rule in this world, is a mystery to us. It's something that God does, beyond our control or influence.

And lastly, this parable shows us that there's a finality to God's kingdom.

Whilst God's kingdom comes, slowly and imperceptibly, there is a definitive endpoint. Whilst God's kingdom doesn't come in one hit, like his disciples were expecting, there will be a time when it comes in its fullness. There is, according to our parable, a final harvest where God's kingdom will be complete.

And that image, in verse 29, of the harvest and the sickle, is used throughout the Bible of the final judgement that God will bring. Of that time when he will establish his rule over all things.

You can see it in Joel 3 for example. There, Joel says:

*“Let the nations be roused and come to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit down to judge all the surrounding nations. Swing the sickle because the harvest is ripe. Come and trample the grapes because the winepress is full; the wine vats overflow because the wickedness of the nations is extreme.” (Joel 3:12-13)*

Whilst God's kingdom grows slowly, as people come to live under the rule of Jesus the king, there will be an endpoint. There will be a time when God establishes his rule definitively in a final act of judgement.

This parable reminds us that God's kingdom has a goal, and a judgement, that it's heading towards. That there will be a time where God's rule will be established over all in their entirety. And we need to be prepared. To live under the rule of Jesus the king and saviour before that day comes.

This parable, with its strange farmer and powerful seed, teaches us that God's rule in this world grows slowly. It's beyond our control. And it's impossible for us to understand. But God's rule over this world is certain. And it will come, in fullness, at that harvest in the end.

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We've seen The Parable of the Growing Seed. But Jesus gives us a second story. A parable that he calls us, in verse 30, to come and think over with him. And it's a very well known story: The Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Here, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed; which, he says, is the smallest of all the seeds on the ground.

Now, the kind of seed that Jesus is talking about here is incredibly small. I'm told that it takes 700 of these little seeds to make up a gram of weight. But Jesus is, of course, using the mustard seed as a well known figure of speech.

In the Mishnah, which is a book of Jewish oral tradition, it uses this same expression. It teaches that even if a tiny bit of dough, "as small as a mustard seed", were to touch something in your kitchen, it would become unclean.

And Jesus actually uses this figure of speech in other contexts. In Matthew 17, Jesus says that if you have faith "the size of a mustard seed", then nothing will be impossible for you in prayer.

Jesus uses this figure of speech for the 'bare minimum'. A mustard seed is the smallest amount possible, or the smallest thing possible.

And in the beginning, Jesus says, that's what the kingdom of God is like.

But in this parable, Jesus actually compares the kingdom of God to what happens to the mustard seed.

You see, it starts off small, the smallest of all the seeds on the ground. But it doesn't end there. Instead, it grows from small to big. Becoming a shrub taller than any of the other garden plants. In fact, it's tall enough and its branches are large enough, Jesus says, that the birds, which may well have eaten one of these little seeds, can now come to shelter and nest in its shade.

The kingdom of God starts small, like a mustard seed. But it becomes big. Big enough to include things under its shade.

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And that's The Parable of the Mustard Seed. But again, what does it teach us about God's kingdom?

Well, firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it shows us that God's rule starts small but grows over time.

The point of the story is not the smallness of the seed. Or how tall the mustard plant is in the end. But the difference between the two. God's kingdom starts small. It has humble beginnings. But in the end, it will be huge.

And actually, the history of the church demonstrates that this is true. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus had gathered a mustard seed worth of people. A tiny amount. He had a hundred and twenty followers in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. It was not a promising start for God's rule over all things.

But, like the mustard seed, God's rule and reign grows. I mean, think of the world today. There are millions, in fact, billions, of Christians. All living under the rule of the Lord Jesus. And think about the number of people that God has gathered across the world and across history. It's an incomprehensibly large number of people.

And this is what Jesus predicts in this parable. He knew what he was talking about. He even notes this, actually, in that reference he made to the birds of the air nesting under the mustard plant. That image, again, is something that the Old Testament points to - the inclusion of the nations. The nations, like the birds, coming to live under the shade of God's rule.

In the Book of Daniel, God's kingdom is described in a similar way. In Daniel's vision, he sees that:

*"There was a tree in the middle of the earth, and it was very tall. The tree grew large and strong; its top reached to the sky, and it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit was abundant, and on it was food for all. Wild animals found shelter under it, the birds of the sky lived in its branches, and every creature was fed from it." (Daniel 4:10-12)*

These animals sheltering under this tree, the birds living in its branches, is all looking forward to the inclusion of the nations in God's kingdom. God's rule, although it starts small, comes to include all kinds of people, from all kinds of places. And that's what Jesus is showing us here.

And, of course, that's the picture we get at the end of the New Testament. That small mustard seed of people, those one hundred and twenty disciples, grows into the picture of Revelation 7:



*“After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9)*

God’s work in this world starts small, but grows large over time.

And the second, and perhaps less obvious, thing that The Parable of the Mustard Seed teaches us is that God’s kingdom, despite its growth and size, will never be impressive in the eyes of the world.

You see, throughout the Old Testament, the kingdom of God is described as a strong and powerful tree. We saw that in Daniel 4. And we also see it in Ezekiel 17.

There, the kingdom of God is described in this way. God says:

*“I will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and plant it. I will pluck a tender sprig from its topmost shoots, and I will plant it on a high towering mountain. I will plant it on Israel’s high mountain so that it may bear branches, produce fruit, and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind will nest under it, taking shelter in the shade of its branches. Then all the trees of the field will know that I am the Lord.” (Ezekiel 17:22-24)*

In Ezekiel and Daniel, the kingdom of God is a strong and powerful tree. Taller than any of the other trees. Impressive and majestic.

But in our parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard plant. And I wonder if you noticed Jesus’s comparison. When it grows, Jesus says, this mustard plant becomes taller than “all the *garden* plants” - all the veggies in the veggie patch. It doesn’t seem nearly as powerful or impressive.

But in making this comparison, I think Jesus is teaching us something important about God’s rule. You see, God’s kingdom is impressive and powerful; like a cedar tree. But, in the eyes of the world, the kingdom of God is profoundly unimpressive; like a mustard plant. God’s rule is real. God’s kingdom is powerful. But that reality and that power are concealed.

And in a way, we really shouldn’t be surprised. And that’s because, the power of the kingdom is just like the power of the king. You see, Jesus established his rule through what seemed to be an act of defeat; his death on the cross. Jesus exercises his power through what seems to be weakness. The power of Jesus our king, who gave himself

for us through his sacrificial death, is hidden and concealed to the world. It's a power and reality grasped by faith, not by sight.

It's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1. He says:

*“For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, because God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)*

God's kingdom is real and powerful. But its reality and power are hidden from the eyes of the world. And because of that, God's rule often seems ordinary and plain, like the mustard seed. But it is growing, and is becoming big.

That's what this Parable of the Mustard Seed teaches us.

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Well, God's kingdom starts small. It grows over time. It becomes big. And there will be an end - when God's rule is established definitively. And whilst the kingdom of God is mysterious and concealed from the eyes of the world, its power is real and its growth is certain.

And friends, knowing these things helps us when the world and the church seem out of control. These parables assure us that Jesus is on the throne. And he knows what he's doing. Jesus has established his kingdom in this world. And he will bring it to its end. It won't look flashy, or impressive, in the eyes of the world, but God's rule is extending; as people hear the gospel, believe, and live with Jesus as their king.

And knowing that God is doing this, and that it will not go backwards, frees us to do our task. It frees us, like that farmer, to scatter the seed and leave the rest to God. To speak the gospel, and trust that God will use it because the power is in the message not us.

And these parables remind us that Jesus knows what he is doing. Just as he predicted, the kingdom is coming. His will is being done. And one day, God's kingdom and rule will be established on earth, just as they are in heaven.