

Let us pray...

Loving God we give you thanks for the gift of your word, the grace of the sacrament and the fellowship of your people. Amen.

Mark's gospel often uses agricultural images to explain something of great value and of great mystery. We hear of the gift of faith and of the Kingdom of God in pictures which include the farmer, the seed, the process of growth and the harvest. These parables often seem obvious and self-explanatory on the surface but they can allow us a deeper understanding if we unpick them a little bit.

So let's look a bit more at this morning's main image- that of the mustard seed. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific like a common and sturdy weed, so it wasn't the kind of plant people would need to sow as a crop. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Mustard shrubs were useful because they offered a range of medicinal qualities.

What we learn from this metaphor is that the reign of God isn't like any ordinary seed; it is like the humble yet mighty mustard seed. It isn't much of a cash crop. Yet *it grows*. It is not easily eradicated. In fact, it is hard to keep out of your garden or your farmland.

Jesus goes on to describe the fully grown mustard plant as "the greatest of all shrubs." Now this plant can grow dense and strong, but it is hardly magnificent to look at. With this statement, Jesus is shocking people into a new way of perceiving greatness. The humour and the absurdity are part of the main point. Jesus could have likened God's reign to the cedars of Lebanon if he wanted to describe something grand, something imposing and impressive. Instead he describes an ordinary and everyday plant.

The point is that this plant, the humble mustard shrub, is one that spreads and grows and will eventually transform the whole landscape. And this substantial shrub will also offer shelter and protection and sustenance to all who live under or within its' branches. It is an image of expansive gentleness not of overwhelming, unmissable glory.

What have we learnt so far? That the reign of God will take root and continue to grow. Not only that it will grow in such a quiet, gentle manner that it will draw people towards it and provide for them generously. When God's kingdom reigns, our strange ideas about status and power and wealth will be challenged, even overturned. Like a fast-generating plant, the Kingdom of God will get into everything. It will bring life and colour to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will force us to look at what we really value and hold to be true.

We learn from today's parables that the Kingdom of God is inevitable. It will keep growing, almost unnoticed. And this brings us to the other image used in today's Gospel- that of the farmer who scatters seed and then goes to bed. I don't know much about farming but I find it odd that this farmer doesn't concern himself with preparing the soil or weeding or tending to the crop. I think this teaches us that our only task is to sow- what happens after that is left with God.

So, the reign of God is not "like" the farmer, or the seed, or the process of growth, or the harvest individually but it is a bit like each of them and a bit like all of them taken together. Perhaps this is what St Paul means when he says 'We walk by faith not by sight.' The Kingdom of God, the reign of God's Kingdom; God- these are mysteries too much for us to understand fully. We cannot comprehend the fullness of God nor God's intention for the world.

Yet, we can learn a lot about how God works from these images. God works subtly, slowly, from the very depth of being. And yet also steadily and irresistibly. God works outwards from the heart of the seed out into the world; from the heart of each of us out into our day to day. We can understand more than we realise about God if we pay attention to the world around us.

I find these parables strangely comforting. I say strangely because in many ways we could interpret these stories to mean humans have very little part to play in making God's kingdom grow. We are told that the seed will grow, silently and relentlessly, and without need of our intervention. I think this is a lesson in humility and truth- we are forced to recognise that God's power is not limited to our power.

What a relief! The kingdom of God will grow and bear fruit and the harvest will be a gift from God. Yet, we are called to play a vital role in the spread of the kingdom- we can scatter the seed. We share what we know of God so that others may come to know God. And in **that** sharing, God's kingdom will be ushered in.

AMEN.