

## Matthew 13.31-33: THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Did you know that:

- **The tallest tree** in the world ever measured = a Douglas fir found in Lynn Valley, British Columbia, in 1902. It stood at 415 feet.
- **The most massive tree** in the world = the 'General Sherman' to be found in the Sequoia National Park, California.: standing at 274.9 feet tall, it has a true girth of 114.6 feet.
- **The largest seed** in the world = the double coconut or 'Coco de Mer, the single-seeded fruit of which may weigh as much as 40lb (18 kg).

Does this seem a strange way to begin a sermon?

In fact it was my text which sent me scurrying to the *Guinness Book of Records*.

At the moment on Sunday mornings we are looking at some of the parables of Jesus.

This morning we are looking at the parable of the mustard seed.

Jesus said: "**The kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. It is the smallest of all, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.**"

### **The kingdom of heaven is like.... a mustard seed**

I confess that I am a great mustard man. If I'm eating a sausage or tucking into a black pudding, then a large dollop of mustard is essential.

One of my contributions to the Rotary breakfast club to which I belong is to insist that mustard is always available on the table.

I find it interesting that long before Mr Coleman came on the scene, mustard was very much in demand.

In the ancient world the **black mustard** seed of which Jesus spoke (*sinapis nigra* to the initiated) was grown both for the grains supplying a sharp tang and for the leaves which were cooked like greens.

However, when Jesus talked about mustard seeds, he was not interested in the difference they made to food - but rather in their *size*.

Mustard seeds were well-known for their smallness. Jesus calls it "**the smallest of all seeds**". Strictly speaking that would not be regarded by the scientists of today as absolutely accurate - e.g. it has no mention in the Guinness Book of Records.

However, in his day and age it was regarded as the smallest.

Indeed, as far as the Jews were concerned the mustard seed was **a byword for smallness**.

- For instance, the Jews talked of a drop of blood as small as a mustard seed;
- Or if the Jews were talking of some small breach of their ceremonial law, they would speak of a defilement as small as a mustard seed;
- Jesus himself used the phrase in this way when he spoke of faith as a grain of mustard seed (Matt 17:20 "**I assure you, if you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Go from here to there,' and it will go. You could do anything**").

The mustard seed is so tiny that it requires 725-760 seeds to weigh a gram.

Yet *from such tiny beginnings comes enormous growth.*

On average a mustard seed grows to a height of two-and-a-half to three meters - eight to ten feet. Indeed, it can even grow to 12 feet in height

In the words of Jesus : "**when it grows up, it becomes the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that the birds come and make nests in its branches**".

I'm told that is no exaggeration - still today birds seek out the shade of its big leaves and nibble on its tangy seeds.

Jesus told a second parable, with a similar thrust: "**The kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with 40 litres of flour until the whole batch of dough rises**".

Do you want some more facts and figures from the Guinness Book of Records?

I'm told that the shortest interval between wheat growing in the field and becoming a slice of bread on the table was 40 minutes.

However, that is not the point at issue here. Jesus says nothing about speed - but rather about *size*

Here was a woman who took a little bit of yeast - and mixed it into 40 litres of flour - and the result was *bread galore*.

Notice: "**40 litres**" of flour - this would have made literally dozens of loaves - enough bread for a meal for 100 people!

This was no ordinary woman doing an ordinary bake.

But then, this was no ordinary story. Jesus here talking about the Kingdom of God.

**The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed**

**The kingdom of heaven is like yeast**

As I have reflected on these parables, two thoughts come to mind about the nature of God's kingdom.

*Where God is at work,*

- *small is often great*
- *everybody is welcome*

## **1. WHERE GOD IS AT WORK SMALL IS OFTEN GREAT**

A handful of mustard seeds wouldn't win a prize at a fruit and vegetable show.

Nor do mustard seeds look very impressive when they are put into the ground - indeed, they disappear from sight.

Yet from those seeds and their planting, tremendous growth may result.

Likewise, when you mix the yeast into the dough, the initial result is not very impressive. It is just a messy lump.

But given time, that messy lump may well result in some tasty bread.

*I.e. Appearances can be deceptive.* What may at the time seem very insignificant, may at the end of the day prove to be momentous in character.

Take for instance ***the signing of the Magna Carta in Runnymede in 1215.***  
I doubt whether at the time either the king or his barons could have guessed what was actually going on. At the time, when King John, much against his will, signed the Magna Carta, it must just have seemed an ordinary power struggle.  
But with the benefit of hindsight the modern historians see that what was then inaugurated was ***British parliamentary democracy*** as we know it.

Likewise ***in AD 28 or whenever, nobody could have guessed what God was doing through the life and ultimately the death of Jesus.***

At the time all the ordinary onlooker could see was a Galilean carpenter, turned itinerant prophet and healer, who was drawing after him a motley mob of taxcollectors and sinners. But even then his success appeared limited. Already he had been turned out of the synagogues. The Jewish religious leader were saying he was in league with the devil. Even his own family wondered if he had gone out of his mind. Even to the keenest of observers, it would have been difficult to have seen that God was at work - let alone have understood that God was at this point invading human history in the person of his Son. It all seemed so ordinary - so low-scale. And ***yet as a result of that one apparently very ordinary life the greatest religious movement this world has ever known was born.***

When Jesus told this parable, there were only 12 disciples - but today there are millions upon millions of people who claim to be his disciples. The seed that was sown has grown - has grown enormously. In spite of all its failings the Christian church the most powerful force for good in the world. *"It has, indeed, been a miracle of history more striking than any one miracle performed by Jesus in his earthly career"* (Elton Trueblood)  
And so we could go on. History is dated by his birth. Today = 26<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010 AD. The influence of this one man has been enormous.

**The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed - like yeast.**

Jesus is saying: *"Don't be deceived by appearances. God is at work in the here and now - just because you can't see it, doesn't mean to say that it's not happening below ground. You may write me off as failure or as a small-time player, but in God's sight 'small' may well be 'beautiful'. From remarkably small beginnings great results can come"*.

Here is a truth we still need to hear today.

Indeed, perhaps it is ***a truth we need to hear more than ever.***

- We live in a society which is dominated by success - the rat-race is all about making it - about climbing the ladder - about making a bigger and bigger pile of dosh. In spite of the slogan "small is beautiful", most of us don't believe it.
- What's more, we want to make it now. In an age of "instant coffee" and "instant tea", "instant soups" and "instant whips", we find it difficult to wait. We want to see results in the here and now.

But Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed and to yeast.

***In God's Kingdom size, at least initially, may not be significant.***

***From the smallest of things great things can come.***

What does this mean?

On a personal level, it means that *we may well not see the results of our labours* for a time - maybe not even in our lifetime.

We may sow the seed, but it may be left to others to enjoy the harvest.

In the first place God, the Lord of the harvest, calls us to be faithful, and not successful. Our time frame may not necessarily be God's time-frame.

I find that an encouraging thought.

## 2. WHERE GOD IS AT WORK EVERYBODY IS WELCOME

In the Kingdom of God, small may often be great, but there is *no place for exclusivity* in God's Kingdom. Jesus makes this clear when, in the parable of the mustard seed, he goes on to say:

**"It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that the birds come and make nests in its branches".**

Almost certainly Jesus was here alluding to a passage in *Ezekiel 17*.

There the prophet was looking to the day when Israel's fortunes would be reversed - and all the nations of the world would come and acknowledge Israel's God as their God. To a nation that was on its beam ends, God spoke *words of hope*:

**"I will take the top of a tall cedar and break off a tender sprout. I will plant it... on Israel's highest mountain. It will... Become a magnificent cedar. Birds of every kind will live there and find shelter in its shade (Ezek 17.22,23).**

The "**tender sprout**" of cedar God takes and plants is a clear reference to a *future Messiah-King* - when he sits on his throne, all the other nations will recognise Israel's God as Lord - Lord of the nations, Lord of time, Lord of creation.

*Jesus boldly incorporates this picture in his parable.*

True there are differences - Ezekiel spoke of a cedar tree, Jesus of a mustard seed - but the picture of birds nesting in the tree is the same - these birds represent the nations of the world.

*Jesus declares that what God had promised to do in Ezekiel he was now doing in his ministry.*

Thro his ministry God was establishing his Kingdom - and in this Kingdom people from every nation would be welcome.

There would be nothing exclusive about God's Kingdom. As Jesus said on another occasion, people will come from the North and the South, from the East and the West.

Yes, where God is at work everybody is welcome.

***The Kingdom of God has nothing in common with holy huddles.***

It has been rightly said that the church is the only institution which exists for the sake of its non-members.

Newcomers are always welcome here at Central Baptist Church.

In a very real sense, every Sunday is a Big Welcome Sunday.

Our church – as hopefully every church – is a church where everybody is welcome.

As we say on our welcome card, 'Central is a church for everybody – children and young people, young singles and young couples, people in mid-life and seniors too'.

What's more, people from different cultures are welcome too – we are not just a church for white Anglos – we are a church where people of colour are welcome. We delight in our diversity in Christ. We want to be a multi-cultural church.

We want to be a church for all. That's why we run the Alpha course.

We don't want to be a church just for people who have grown up in church – we want to be a church for people who have no church background whatsoever.

Nor do we want to be a church just for people who appear to have got their life together – we want to be a church for people who are struggling with life, for people who have messed up in life. Indeed, the reality is that one way or another, all of us have failed God and failed one another. This church is for people who know their need of God

This church is for everybody – because in God's Kingdom everybody is welcome.

**"The kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. It is the smallest of all, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches."** Here is God's word for each one of us today.