

THE STORY OF THE MUSTARD SEED

In the Gospel of Matthew the parable is as follows:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field; which indeed is smaller than all seeds but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.[Matthew 13:31–32]

In the Gospel of Mark:

It's like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, though it is less than all the seeds that are on the earth, yet when it is sown, grows up, and becomes greater than all the herbs, and puts out great branches, so that the birds of the sky can lodge under its shadow.[Mark 4:30–32]

The Mustard Seed by Julia Venter



In the Gospel of Luke:

It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and put in his own garden. It grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the sky lodged in its branches

Jesus made a habit of telling stories that challenged and disrupted people's thoughts and he always made his stories recognisable and familiar to his first century audience, and so we have plenty of references to farming, to sowing seeds, plants and trees. Things that people who lived off the land would have been all too familiar with.

The parable of the Mustard Seed is about the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus says in his story that the Kingdom of God is like a growing seed, it is sown and it grows for that is its nature. Jesus chooses to reference the mustard seed. Now there were two types of plant that we know that grew in the area Jesus lived. It could be the Brassica Nigra plant also known as the black mustard seed, which was a common crop. However, this plant does not grow into a tree, as described in the story.

Perhaps Jesus is talking about *Salvadora Persica*, which is like mustard but it grows into a large tree. This plant can grow wild and once it is cultivated it behaves a lot like mint; when it takes hold it spreads all over the place and is almost impossible to get rid of. Jesus is comparing God's Kingdom to an invasive plant that repels all efforts to vanquish it and instead it grows and spreads. Even

when you think it has gone, back up it comes, rejecting all attempts to prune or tame it. It is wild, unpredictable and unstoppable. Also the tree has such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade. Now that's curious because I know that all farmers actively discourage birds near their crops of fields. That's why they have scarecrows.

Here is where Jesus challenges and disrupts his listeners. He says the Kingdom of God is like an invasive plant that grows so big that it attracts those who we might not want around, those characters who we have shunted to the margins perhaps. Those who we have excluded. Those who we have made to feel unwelcome. This mustard kingdom tree opens its branches wide and invites the unwanted in, because it knows they are not a threat. This tree, this kingdom - it is shelter. It is sanctuary. It is home.

I also realise that Jesus, in telling this parable, may also be telling a huge cosmic joke. The joke here is not only that mustard seeds are tiny, but that the people in Jesus's day didn't plant mustard seeds.

Mustard was a weed — and a noxious, stubborn weed at that. If a 1st century gardener in Palestine were foolish enough to plant it, it would quickly take over his land, dropping seeds everywhere, and breaking down all barriers of separation between itself and the other plants in the garden. Imagine a gardener today planting Japanese knotweed or dandelions. These are commonplace nuisances we try to get rid of, not plants we'd ever cultivate on purpose.

Mustard, moreover, is not a plant that grows with any stateliness or beauty. It's nothing like a cedar, or a beautiful beech or even a well-tended rose bush. It grows like a weed, and it looks like one. So what is Jesus saying when he describes the sacred and the holy as a tiny, insignificant mustard seed? What does it mean to take an invasive, spindly weed — a plant we'd sooner discard than sow — and make it the very heart, the very structural centre, of God's kingdom? Who and what counts in God's economy? What is beautiful? Who matters? Where do we see the sacred?

The last image in this set of parables is that of nesting birds finding shade in the branches of the mustard plant. It's a pretty image on its face, but it, too, as it turns out, is a joke: who wants birds taking up residence in their fields. Birds eat seeds and fruits. They can wreak havoc in a cornfield.

But Jesus isn't for sticking scarecrows into fields to scare away the birds. Why? Because the kingdom of God is all about welcoming the unwelcome. Sheltering the unwanted. Practicing radical inclusion. The garden of God doesn't exist for itself; it exists to offer hospitality to everyone the world deems unworthy. It exists to attract and to house the very people we'd rather shun.

This is what the kingdom of God looks like. It isn't what I thought it would be. It doesn't operate the way I think it should. This is good news, but it isn't always easy news. The truth is, it hurts to surrender my imagination to God's expansive, life-changing care. It hurts to trust, to accept mystery, to seek God in the commonplace, and to embrace the unwanted thing as beloved.

So in church, let us continue to be a place where we share stories that disrupt and unsettle. Let us be a people who provide shelter for the lonely and dispossessed, the people who are outcasts, pushed out to the margins because they don't represent the norm. Let all of us have the attitude that says to newcomers and all comers ` Make yourself at home. You are always welcome here.

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