**Sermon for Lent 16 March 2022**

**Emma Phillips**

**Matthew 13.31-35**

**The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

**31**He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; **32**it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

**The Parable of the Yeast**

**33**He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

**The Use of Parables**

**34**Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. **35**This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet:

‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables;
    I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.’

First of all, apologies to anyone who was looking forward to the readings for the First Sunday of Lent – you are quite right, this is not as given by the lectionary! But my energies will stretch no further than Messy Church tomorrow, which is demanding without Graham’s help. So I hope we will all be blessed by reflecting on Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed, which is our Messy Church text.

Any of you have any seeds at home? In a garden shed, ready to sow, or in the kitchen? Beans and peas ready to eat, pepper corns and other spices, to add flavour? Jesus is doing what he always does, playing with familiar images to get us thinking altogether new thoughts. I’m sure you will all have heard this parable before – but I wonder whether you have allowed yourself to be puzzled by it? Do any of you know what a mustard plant looks like? If not, then oil seed rape is a close relative! It’s a common plant across all the Mediterranean, often a weed. At most 2m high, it is a tough annual that whizzes upwards and outwards to set as many bright yellow flowers as possible, and make lots of tiny seeds, before dying in the winter – not exactly a tree!

Jesus does know what he is talking about here! He is a country boy, and he will have seen mustard both grown as a crop and wild by roadsides. He hasn’t made an ignorant mistake! He’s drawing on proverbs and traditional imagery here – and subverting them as he often does. Jewish people would refer to finding a mustard seed in the same way as we talk of finding a needle in a haystack. So the suggestion that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds doesn’t need to be taken literally – there are actually plenty of smaller seeds, but it would culturally represent something tiny. Rather different is the idea of the plant growing so big that all the birds of the air can rest in it. Now there are several OT references to kingdoms as trees in which birds can take their rest. Ezekiel in Ch 17 prophesises that God will take a shoot of a cedar tree and plant it on a high mountain – where it will grow to become a lofty tree that will shelter all the birds of the air.

So you won’t be the only ones doing a double take at Jesus’ suggestion that this mighty image of the kingdom of God has been swapped for a mustard plant! Just what is Jesus getting at? Well in the way of parables, there is no tidy answer – we are left to puzzle at the story for ourselves, and each of us will identify in our own way. So let’s explore a little what this image might tell us about the kingdom of God.

How is this kingdom like a bright yellow flowered plant that crops up everywhere, attracts birds with nutritious seeds, which in turn give flavour to food? Note how the parable is paired with the parable of the yeast in which a tiny amount of active ingredient transforms a loaf of bread. Maybe this is an apt description of the early church – small communities cropping up all over the place, but by no means invisible, offering spiritual food to anyone who was attracted. The early church communities were not rich or influential, and maybe some of them did not last very long – but new ones popped up just as older ones were persecuted or split apart. The church was impossible to eradicate, just like mustard. And by its very presence it changed the wider community, spreading kingdom values and proclaiming God’s presence.

This is a profoundly hopeful image, not just for Jesus’s time. Today we worry about how small our church communities have become, and how little impact they seem to have on the world around us. We certainly don’t feel like mighty cedar trees, providing shade for all the nations as Ezekiel prophesies. But mustard plants? Yes, we can be mustard plant churches! We can continue to provide zest and flavour for all the people we know, and we can continue to be a place of welcome and shelter to those who come to us. Being small is no handicap to all of that! We should be encouraged that mustard can flourish in the cracks and unwanted spaces as well as in intentionally sown crops, and although it may be an annual, it comes back year after year. The church is not in any danger of disappearing, although it may not continue in the same shape and form.

But I would like to end by reminding ourselves that mustard plants are pretty noticeable! They don’t worry about whether they are important or relevant – they just come up all over the place with bright yellow flowers to be seen by all! So we are not to look inwards and hide away, nor believe the lies of the devil that we are unimportant or irrelevant. We have the amazing news of God’s love to share! So as we come to pray for Ukraine, trust that God will use our prayers! Be encouraged that we are joining the church all over the world as we pray, and all the heavenly hosts. We are mobilising spiritual forces to combat evil, a vital role, alongside giving generously and contributing to any aid where we can. A mustard seed of faith can move mountains! Many mustard seeds will change the world, as God fulfils his promises.

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