

Sermon on Sunday 16 June 2024

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Readings: 1 Samuel 16. 1, 6-13 & Mark 4. 26-34

Mark 4 v 30: "With what can we compare the Kingdom of God?"

There are more than a dozen passages in our Gospel that ask that question. What is the Kingdom of God like? We heard two of them this morning. We're going to look at the second one.

"With what can we compare the Kingdom of God?" I don't know what sort of reply Jesus' audience was expecting. Perhaps something about the old Kingdom of David, whose anointing we heard about in the Old Testament reading, back in the glory days of old Israel. If they were they would be surprised, because the answer in this parable is: a mustard seed.

We're talking about black mustard here, which you'll find all over the Middle East. Actually, its seeds aren't especially small, and it doesn't grow into a tree. It does grow rapidly into big bushes up to 9 feet high. That's big, and it's a lot of welcome shade in a hot, dry country.

But why is it like the Kingdom of God?

At about the time Mark was writing his Gospel, the great Roman historian and scientist Pliny the Elder was writing his famous 'Natural History', which he sadly left unfinished when he died in

the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. This is what he had to say about black mustard:

"Mustard is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but, on the other hand, once it has been sown it is scarcely possible to get your fields free of it as the seed, when it falls, germinates at once."

I'd like to say that was my own translation, but I have to admit I got that from Wikipedia.

Mustard is very good for your health – but once it's planted it runs wild all over the place and you can't control it. I think that suits the Kingdom of God very well, don't you?

To some it is life and healing, but to others it is like a weed, you can't control it, it's a darned nuisance popping up where you don't want it. Jesus warned us, didn't he? The Kingdom of God would have many enemies, but no matter how hard they tried, they would not be able to weed it out.

I do like the idea of God's kingdom growing like a weed. Pushing its way up between the paving stones where people, for so many reasons, have tried to pave over the beautiful but unruly garden of grace, because it won't grow the way we want it, or it offends our desire for order and control over our world and our lives. Christians can be as guilty of that as anyone. But our God is subversive. He's the original guerrilla gardener.

The parable talks about a man planting a seed. For His Kingdom to grow, God still needs a seed to be planted. This is the challenge to us.

The Kingdom of God is not a distant, spiritual hope that might turn up somewhere, some day. The Kingdom of God is what actually happens when people like us listen to God and do things His way – let him be our King.

Every time you say to yourself, 'I will do this God's way'; every time you choose to say a kind word, and not a cruel word; to put another's need first and not your own; to go the right path and not the easy one, you're sowing a mustard seed, and the Kingdom of God germinates, and who knows what it may grow into.

Black mustard plants don't grow in isolation. They grow in clumps, close together. They like community. And, like I said, they're not trees. They're annuals. The plant only lives for one year. It grows all the way up from a seed, and then dies back into the soil.

Sowing the Kingdom of God is not a one-off event. It's **not** like planting an acorn and watching a huge oak tree that will take a hundred years to grow and will stand for hundreds more.

The seeds of the Kingdom of God are being constantly replanted, germinating again and again for new, vigorous growth.

Maybe our idea of the Kingdom of God can be bit too institutional, a bit too static. A bit too much of an oak tree. Jesus never gives a fixed definition of the Kingdom of God, he doesn't give it a written Constitution. He just gives us lots of pictures and stories drawn from daily life. A wonderful kaleidoscope of how different the world can be tomorrow if only we listen to His Father.

Of course, when **we** encounter mustard, it's not usually in a field. It's in a little jar, and although it's yellow, it's made from the seed of the white mustard plant. It may not be the smallest seed, but might it be the smallest condiment jar?

Who's a mustard fan? I looked in the fridge at home and found 7 different kinds of mustard! Can anyone beat that? I wonder what our mustard can tell us about the Kingdom of God.

It's a condiment. Mustard isn't meant to be eaten on its own. You eat it with something, whether it's spread on ham or hot dogs or Welsh rarebit, or mixed in mayonnaise or salad dressing.

You don't eat it by the spoonful, especially if you are using traditional English mustard. Just the tiniest little dab spread on cold ham, and my taste buds are in heaven.

A little mustard makes even the most ordinary of food taste special. Have we got a parable there? The Kingdom of God is when God's grace, and our faithfulness, our willingness to listen

to him and do ordinary things His way, makes our world taste special.

The Kingdom of God isn't something that's going to happen in another time or another, holier place. It's meant to be spread on our daily lives. It's something that happens, here and now, in our ordinary experiences and daily routines, if we only let God be our guide and King.

We'll pray a bit later, 'Your Kingdom come, Your will be done.' Let's mean it. Not someday, not somewhere, but in the very next thing you do. Spice your life up. Give it a dash of the Kingdom of God.

