

“MORE PARABLES (Mark 13)”
Mark 4:21-34

Well, how did we get on working out the implications of last week’s sermon? Can you still remember what it was about? Have you done anything about it? For those of you who weren’t able to be with us, let me briefly recap for you. We’ve been working our way through Mark’s account of the life of Jesus and have seen him arrive in the area around Galilee with a radical new message for the people of his day – and, indeed, for the people of every succeeding generation. Mark makes it clear right from the outset that Jesus is the appointed and anointed Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, and the message which he brings is that the “*good tidings*” originally proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets are about to be fulfilled. God’s new kingdom is breaking in to the world, transforming lives and redefining the structures of society.

The people who listen to Jesus are locked into old ways of thinking about God, and about his world and the way it operates, so Jesus invites his listeners to “*repent and believe*” – or, as we’ve been translating it, “*give up your own agenda and trust me for mine*”. That agenda involves liberating people from all that confines them and restricts them – illness and disability, demonic possession, a reliance on outmoded rules and regulations, selfishness, anxiety, fear and so on. Jesus has demonstrated how the old laws, the Law given to the people through Moses and the myriad extra amendments that have been added since the Exodus, have a part to play in allowing people to live as God wants them to, but they are not to be used as instruments of oppression by people with a vested interest in hanging on to power.

Of course, that has led Jesus into conflict with the legal and religious hierarchy, who dispute his authority to heal, to forgive sins, to exorcise. They claim that he is in league with the Devil and have vowed to kill him. Even his own family think he is mad and have tried to get him to leave it all and come back home with them. But the crowds keep flocking to hear him and to see him, and Jesus has gained quite a band of followers, twelve of whom he has appointed as apostles. Last time, we looked at one of Mark’s rare accounts of what Jesus actually taught – a parable, a story about the various soils into which a farmer scatters his seed. The story, I suggested, is about our response to Jesus and his message; but, more than that, it is about our responsibility to act on what we hear. We cannot simply sit back and listen, and assume that that means we’re making progress as Christians, without taking responsibility in our own lives for acting on and developing the message.

Part of the difficulty, though, is that what Jesus says here – and Mark emphasises this – is said in parables, in these little stories, the point of which is not always necessarily immediately obvious. In fact, Jesus has to sit down with his disciples after he’s told the Story of the Soils and explain it all to them. And the section we’ve read this morning finishes in the same way (v34). If this message is so important and so urgent, why doesn’t Jesus come straight out with it. It’s frustrating and infuriating. Well, the three shorter parables that are contained in what we’ve just read help us in our understanding of it all.

1. THE LAMP ON A STAND (vv21-25)

The illustration Jesus uses here is, as so many of his illustrations are, totally absurd. You don’t light a lamp and then put it under a bucket or under the bed, do you? There cannot be any situations in which a sane person would do that. The light would be totally useless in such a place and it could actually cause a bit of damage. No, you put it on a stand so that its light can make a difference to the environment around it. You don’t conceal it: you bring it out into the open.

Well, that’s the case with Jesus’ teaching. Its meaning is not hidden and cryptic. It’s actually being revealed. It’s meant to be brought out into the open. And he repeats the little phrase he used after telling the parable of the soils – “*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*” As we said last time, what that

actually boils down to is, “Listen to this and think about it, if you’re serious”. If you’re not serious about what Jesus has to say, well, it will all seem a bit strange. But if you’re prepared to reflect upon it and take it seriously, then its meaning will become clear.

And as you respond, so you will grow in your understanding. That’s what vv24,25 are all about. The deeper you get into it, the more you’ll get to know about it. If you aren’t too fussed about it, even the little you do know will eventually seep out of your consciousness. God’s word, the message of Jesus, is a gift to you and, as Hugh Anderson writes, “*The only limiting factor is the degree of men’s openness to receive the gift.*” The message of Jesus is there for you if you want it. Once again, you need to respond and to take responsibility for continuing to respond.

2. **THE GROWING SEED** (vv26-29)

However, fortunately for all of us, really, the progress of the Kingdom is not dependent on your response. That’s what the next parable is about. It’s another story about a sower and some seed and the soil and the harvest. This time the emphasis is on the seed rather than the soil. The seed contains within itself the power to grow and nothing can stop that happening. (The assumption here seems to be that the seed falls into good soil.) That, says Jesus, is just like the Kingdom of God.

You see, as far as the new age of God’s rule coming to fruition is concerned, no-one can do anything either to stop it or to speed it up. God’s at work, whether you like it or not, and his purposes will be fulfilled whether you, as an individual, or we, as a church, respond in the way he wants or not. In Jesus’ day that would have meant that zeal for the Law (as demonstrated by the Pharisees and their allies), revolutionary political activity (as Simon and other Jewish nationalists believed), preparation of the elect (as the Essenes tried to do – we don’t encounter them in the gospels, but they were contemporary with Jesus) – all these activities could not affect God’s timing and God’s plan.

And it’s still true, I believe. Marching round the place with banners, sticking to a strict code of rules and regulations, trying to divine the times and dates of the apocalyptic vision of *Revelation* – none of that stuff will bring forward the day when the climax of God’s kingdom finally comes. That doesn’t, of course, mean we sit back and do nothing: we can be doing our bit to improve the world as we go along, but we cannot by so doing hurry God into fulfilling his great promise. But just as with the growing seed, there is a certain inevitability about it – it **will** happen.

3. **THE MUSTARD SEED** (vv30-32)

Of course, the problem is that we don’t seem to see a great deal of what we think ought to be happening in God’s Kingdom. Looking around, there are all kinds of things happening that seem to be quite counter to the characteristics of the Kingdom of God as described in the Bible. And that would most certainly have been the case at the time of Jesus too. He came proclaiming that the vision of God’s restored earth, as first communicated by the prophets, was now coming to fulfilment. But those who heard him would have looked around and seen the pagan Roman Empire flexing its political and pseudo-religious muscles everywhere they looked. Some of them might even have been able to remember the legacy of the Greeks. And a good number of the Jewish people seemed to be losing their faith. Surely this wasn’t what God had promised, was it?

And today we look around us and see war and tension, sexual promiscuity, abuse and domestic violence, governments encouraging covetousness and indebtedness, appalling inequalities within and between nations – what’s that got to do with the kingdom that Jesus came to announce? We’ve had two millennia since then we’re still waiting. The signs of the Kingdom are really rather small.

Just like a mustard seed. Of course, the mustard seed isn't actually the smallest seed there is, but there was a saying in the time of Jesus – “Small as a mustard seed”. (In the same way, a docker's sandwich isn't the thickest thing around today, but we still say “Thick as a docker's sandwich.”) However, it's still pretty small and it grew in Jesus' day into a bush that could be ten feet high. That's quite a contrast – and it's the contrast that Jesus is stressing here. He's not talking about the growth process as such, but about the fact that from something very small can come something very big. The Kingdom of God might seem very small now, but just wait until it's fully grown – then you'll see how great it is. So there's a sense in which Jesus is holding out the hope of a great Kingdom – one in which many people will find a place. There may well be an allusion here to the way in which the Old Testament prophets used the image of a tree to refer to a great empire in whose branches people from many nations found security.

So don't worry. The message of Jesus will become increasingly clear as you commit yourself to discovering more about it. The Kingdom of God will continue to grow despite your problems and failures and successes. And one day the Kingdom of God really will be truly great: there are small signs of it now – but just you wait and see how much it will grow. Be encouraged and keep at it – it's well worth it!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What have you done about last week's message? (Go on, be honest!)
2. Do you find Jesus' teaching straightforward? Is this because of the way you have thought about it, or because of what other people have told you?
3. What is Jesus trying to say in v25, do you think?
4. Can we really make no difference to the building of God's Kingdom? Why/why not?
5. Take a few minutes to think and then put your impression of the Kingdom of God into parable form. “*The Kingdom of God is like ...*”
6. What have you learned from this passage?