

June 13, 2021 (Mark 4:30-32)

“The Kingdom of God is like a **mustard seed**, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the **birds of the air can make nests in its shade**” (Mark 4:30-32)

This parable of the mustard seed is the **only parable** that is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Mt, Mk & Lk).

Explanation and Reflection

Jesus lived at a time when the Jews in Palestine/Israel were ruled over by the mighty Roman Empire. The traditional belief of the Jewish people was that when the Messiah comes, he will drive out the Romans from Palestine and will restore political independence to Israel. So, they expected Jesus the Messiah to act soon to restore independence and self-rule by defeating the Romans through a political revolution and, if needed, through war and violence. Their new kingdom will be triumphalist, powerful, and ostentatious.

However, Jesus thought differently. He knew that you cannot establish peace by defeating your enemy; you cannot establish peace through violence, because violence breeds violence. Therefore, by means of parables (stories), he teaches his followers the necessity for love, sharing, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and even love for one's enemies (Mt 5:43-48). Jesus wanted to restore independence to the Jews not by overthrowing the Romans through violence and war, but through transformation of human hearts resulting in a fundamental change in the unjust structures of power. If his followers expected the new kingdom to be immediate, triumphalist, and ostentatious, Jesus envisaged a kingdom with very humble and insignificant beginnings (not triumphalist), a kingdom which will have a very slow pace of growth (not immediate), and a kingdom which will be inclusive and providing hospitality to everyone. It is in this context that we have to understand Jesus' comparison of God's kingdom with the mustard seed.

Today we don't consider the mustard seed as the smallest of all seeds. But, for the Jews of the first century, mustard seed was indeed the smallest seed **they knew**. Seldom does a mustard plant grow to a height of over four or five feet. But once in a while, a few plants will grow large enough into small trees, on the branches of which the birds of the air could make their nests. Similarly, Jesus says, the kingdom of God too would gradually grow despite its seemingly humble, insignificant beginnings and slow growth.

Now we come to the two most significant implications of this parable.

1. Hospitality & Inclusiveness

No farmer in Palestine would ever devote an entire field for the cultivation of mustards. There are two reasons for this. **First**, the mustard seeds did not have much commercial value in the first century Palestine. **Secondly**, mustards were really obnoxious weeds that would get out of control and take over the whole land where it is not wanted. However, despite its obnoxious nature and commercial insignificance, it is these mustard plants that provide home and hospitality to the homeless birds which “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns” (Mt 6:26; Lk 12:24). The hapless and helpless birds of the air are never welcome in a field of commercial crops as they would destroy the kernels. But, they are welcome and given a home and sustenance by the

devalued commercially insignificant mustard plants. Like the mustard seed, Jesus envisages an unprejudiced and inclusive society, which will provide hospitality and sustenance to the poor, the socially suspect, the marginalized, and the outcasts (like the birds of the air).

2. Love takes precedence over Law

A Jewish farmer was forbidden by his Sacred Scripture to sow two types of seed in their fields: “You shall not sow your field with two types of seed” (Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:9). Now, the Jewish farmer transgresses this biblical law and scatters also some mustard seeds among other valued and commercial crops like the olives. As the mustard seeds didn’t have much commercial value, a Jewish farmer wouldn’t mind if a few birds pitched their tents on these wild plants and ate their seeds. His audacity to bypass/transgress this biblical law made it possible for the hapless birds to find a place to pitch their tents and feed their little ones.

Jesus practiced what he taught. He broke the law of Sabbath many a time to heal the sick and permitted his hungry disciples to pluck grains of wheat to eat on a Sabbath day. St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that all our knowledge of Scripture and all our Faith is of no use if we have no love, and he ends this chapter by saying that “Love is greater than even faith.”

For the God of the Bible, “the earth and everything in it belongs to the LORD” (Psalm 24:1). All God’s creatures have the basic right to freely enjoy the fruits from the garden of life (Genesis 2:16). However, to ensure that all living beings are able to enjoy this hospitality of God, we need to be willing to transgress and demolish certain unjust structures and barriers so that all God’s children have sufficient (if not equal) opportunities to partake in God’s hospitality (Mk 8:1-8).

Peroration

First, Jesus’ comparison of God’s Reign with the small and insignificant mustard seed teaches that God’s Reign has very humble beginnings, neither violence nor hatred. A change in the society comes not through imposition of doctrines, force or violence, but through a transformation of human hearts. The Kingdom of God is neither ostentatious nor triumphalist, but unassuming and vulnerable.

Secondly, the hapless and unwelcome birds of the air were able to pitch their tent on the mustard plants only because the Jewish farmer went beyond the prescribed law and sowed two different kinds of seeds in his farm, which was forbidden. So, a good Christian should be willing to transgress a law when it stands as an obstacle in creating an egalitarian and inclusive society.

Finally, Love is greater than everything; greater than even religious sacrifices and faith (Proverbs 21:3; Mt 9:12; 1 Corinthians 13:13). Beliefs and Faith have to express themselves in Love (1 Corinthians 12:31). St Paul says that the law was only a disciplinarian or a nursemaid until Christ came (Galatians 3:24-25) but, with Christ, love takes precedence over law (Mt 12:7). The law is **only** a lodestar and a compass, not an Ordnance map. The law is not the gospel, but love is. Amen.

