

Bennochy Church 24th June 2018

What do you know about mustard seeds? Well we know they are very small, about 1 to 2 millimetres (0.039 to 0.079 in) in diameter. A very significant fact in the famous parable of Jesus. There are three kinds of mustard seeds; black, brown and white. Jesus was probably talking about white mustard seeds. The top mustard seed producer today is Pakistan, and in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, they are one of the ingredients in the witches brew, called 'eye of newt'.

A story from Wikipedia. The earliest reference to mustard is from India from in the fifth century BC. Gautama Buddha told the story of the grieving mother and the mustard seed. When a mother loses her only son, she takes his body to the Buddha to find a cure. The Buddha asks her to bring a handful of mustard seeds from a family that has never lost a child, husband, parent, or friend. When the mother is unable to find such a house in her village, she realizes death is common to all, and she cannot be selfish in her grief. The Buddha states that if an individual were to pick a single mustard seed every hundred years from a seven-mile cube worth of mustard seeds, then by the time the last seed is picked, the age of the world cycle would still continue. (If a mustard seed is 3 mm in diameter, then taking one seed every 100 years from a seven-mile cube of seeds, would take 936 quintillion years, 68 billion times the age of the universe.

In Jewish texts, they compare the knowable universe to the size of a mustard seed, to demonstrate the world's insignificance and to teach humility.

One of the great images of scripture is nature. In this parable Jesus says, the man who scatters the seed does not make it grow. While he sleeps and goes about his work, the seeds are sprouting. We have a role to play, but it is God who makes things grow and so bear fruit.

In the background to this story is the great parable of the sower, and its explanation by Jesus. The ground upon which the seeds fall is vital, and in the parable that represents people's lives and how receptive they are to God. In a sense, the parable of the mustard seed builds on that story.

There is also the strange notion that to some, parables don't make any sense. Hear the words of Jesus in Mark 4: 12; *'They may look and look, yet not see; they may listen and listen, yet not understand. For if they did, they would turn to God, and he would forgive them.'* There is a deliberate obscurity built into the words of Jesus. Instead of transparency, his words are opaque.

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is the same. In this small group of disciples, there is the first extension of the Kingdom. It

contains God's future glory, but to the vast majority of people; is hidden from sight.

As part of his teaching ministry, Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God, and in the parable of the mustard seed, he is trying to use an image to describe something that is actually indescribable. He does not say, 'it is'. He says, 'it is like...!'

It is a parable of comparison and there is a wee bit of exaggeration thrown in! What starts off so small, ends up big enough for small birds to sit on its branches. How tall do these bushes grow? Around Lake Galilee, they would normally grow to about 4 feet, but they could grow, to up to 10-15 feet in height.

From the tiniest of beginnings, the Kingdom of God will grow. Actually it had already begun. In Jesus, the Kingdom stood before them. It was also a work in progress. It was hugely important that this message was shared with those first disciples, to be then passed on.

There was a problem. As people of their time, they were still anticipating that God would usher in his Kingdom, but in their life time, in a very dramatic show of power, centred on the Holy city of Jerusalem. People were impatiently waiting for the Messiah to return and usher in the Kingdom of God, for the people of Israel.

Here is the message of a 'new' Kingdom, beginning to 'leak' out into the world. It was not about Israel. It is about Jesus. It is not

surprising therefore that at that moment in time, not many understand what Jesus was talking about, and even the disciples had to have such parables explained to them.

It is interesting to note that the idea of growth within this new Kingdom of God, was seen to be 'natural'. It was going to happen, even if it was a mystery to the people listening to Jesus. I wonder how we understand that idea, which seems to stand in sharp contrast with the decline of the church in Scotland. I have no answer to that. Except to say, that spiritual growth comes from God alone. If there is an easy understanding to the parable, that is it.

Maybe seeds of faith works best when they are small, because what is left for us to do, is to trust in God.

Maybe seeds of hope works best when they are small. The future is unknown, and we walk the road with pilgrim feet, trusting in God alone.

The Kingdom of God is one where we are asked to live with faith and hope as small as the mustard seed. For that, allows God, to build his church. Amen.