

“It’s A Mystery”

(Mark 4.26-34)

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Introduction: Cedars and Mustard Shrubs

Ezekiel (17.22-24) has this beautiful prophecy... God will take a tiny sprig and grow it into a magnificent towering cedar tree, so big that every kind of bird will nest in the shade of its mighty branches. It’s music to the ears of a Jewish nation shattered into almost extinction by the Babylonian invasion. From the tiniest of twigs, something wonderfully impressive will grow!

Six centuries later, Jesus of Nazareth recalls this prophecy in a parable¹... but instead of a mighty tree, God grows a mustard shrub... not a tree at all... in fact it’s regarded by Jewish law as a weed! That’s not what the crowd expected to hear! (*A mustard shrub!!!*)

It’s a parable about *the Kingdom of God*... and Christ’s intent is (as always) subversive. He’s trying to unsettle our minds, our conventions, assumptions and prejudices... in order that we might see with different eyes.

Jesus appeared to have little interest in what currently passes for institutional religion – he left no credal statements, no rules and regulations, no structure. What he was focused on, was opening a radically different perception of reality... suggesting an entirely different imagining of God and Life... that he named *the Kingdom*.

The Parable

Today’s first parable is typical! Imagine the scene... a small crowd of ordinary people... mainly small-time subsistence farmers and labourers... gathered to hear the visiting rabbi.

¹ The birds nesting in the shade of the branches is the ‘give away’.

Jesus says... 'There's this guy... with a small patch of ground... and one day he scatters some seed on it. Then he forgets all about it – he goes off doing other stuff. In fact, to be truthful, he's a lazy type and he does a fair bit of sleeping-in – too fond of wine, so he's not one to be up early. Anyway, the days go by... until one morning he walks outside to find that... incredibly... the seed has sprouted! He's got no idea how – he didn't do anything... just chucked it in the ground. And it grows and it grows... and ends up carrying heads of grain far better than he ever could have imagined. That galvanises him all right – he gets cracking with the sickle then! He can't believe how blessed he is. And he's got no idea how it happened. It's a total mystery... Life's like that... isn't it. That's how it is in the Kingdom of God.'

Most of the crowd laugh, but some of the farmers are more angry than amused. 'That'd be typical of a rabbi. You've got no idea how much work it takes to get a decent crop up. Getting the ground ready, keeping the weeds and the pests away... and always the worry... watching the weather, counting the days, hoping like crazy it was good seed in the first place. You and your crazy stories... Don't you know, we're only one crop-failure away from starvation... all the time?'

Jesus scratches his head and replies, 'Yeah, I do know how tight things are for you... and I can see the heavy load it puts on your hearts... how it eats away at you... how it's breaking down your community as neighbours. I can see that! And I know that anxiety feels so real, so compelling... But I've come to say to you... when you see things through God's eyes, it's not like that at all. Look at me... I've got nothing but the rags on my back, and the truth is, if you don't get generous tonight and feed me, I'll lie down to sleep in a ditch somewhere with an entirely empty stomach. I understand insecurity... But when it comes to Life, the mystery is entirely in God's hands. Stuff happens... good stuff sometimes... things grow from ridiculously small and unlikely beginnings... blessing comes by surprise. We don't make it happen; in fact, we can't even understand it... because it's all God's work. Sure... you can't control the outcome... you might end up with a mustard shrub rather than a cedar tree, but hey... even mustard is good for birds. And it's like us Jews... tough... persistent... you can't get rid of it easy. I know it's a stupid story – but just turn it over in your heart for a bit. What if reality isn't like you've been taught to see it? What if it **is** like that mad farmer of mine... who doesn't allow anxiety to get to him... who sleeps long and

late, because he knows that it's all up to God. What would your life be like if you could live like that? And I'm telling you straight... that's how it is in the Kingdom of God!

Reorientation

Such simple teaching... but can you hear and *feel* the challenge?

I want to live like that mad farmer – to live life in Christ Jesus' kingdom where I can open myself and enjoy life... because I know that God is in control and blessings will flow. But we've been conditioned to believe that we're in charge... that we have to make it happen... that good things will only come if we strive and worry... In fact, we've been taught that if we don't stay on top of things, control the outcomes, then we're always only a millisecond away from disaster.

Could we live according to Jesus' vision of reality?

I'd like to be a person who didn't feel compelled to always achieve a pre-determined outcome. To be someone who knew how to *leave things alone* in order that God may work on it in Her own way. Confident... trusting... and ready to respond when the unexpected blessing comes.

But that would take a major re-orientation of my perception and my life.

Noticing

Such reorientation is more a matter of *imagination* than *will-power*... We've got to catch *the kingdom* like we might catch Covid or the flu... unexpectedly and out of our control.

But it helps the process of the Spirit if we notice some things within these simple parables of Jesus. Notice...

1. The real and the 'big' action... the really significant business of sprouting and growing... is God's work. All we're doing is watching-on... in fact, often not even that – it happens without us, even when we sleep!
2. The work of God is essentially mysterious. We don't know how it happens. We may talk about it, write books about it, and even legislate or set-up processes to 'make it happen', but in truth we've got no idea. It's God's work and it's largely a mystery to us.
3. It's not only mysterious but it's also *hidden*. The tradition speaks about this a lot – we only see small signs of what God's Spirit is doing. It is the classic tip of the iceberg. Sometimes it's hard to trust in a work that you can't even see!
4. There will be a harvest, and we will be called to respond in action... but the outcome may not be what we dreamed of. We wanted a towering cedar tree, but we may end up with a squat mustard shrub! The outcome, however, will be almost always full of life-giving surprise. Like a mustard shrub... the Kingdom-life grows fast... it grows anywhere and spreads like wildfire... and it's persistent – once it's established in your life, you'll never eradicate it.

Conclusion

To be true to this parable we need to recognise that the primary action is God's – the farmer steps back and lets it happen. Indeed, he goes off elsewhere and doesn't worry about it... he sleeps deeply.

Jesus taught that we can have perfect trust in God. We can trust that *something* will indeed happen, (even if it's not the outcome we wanted)... and that this *something* will be full of unexpected life!