**The advancing Kingdom of God**

Text: Mark 4:26-29

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**Scriptures:** Joel 3:11-18; Mark 4:26-29; 1 Cor 3:1-9; James 5:1-11; Rev 14:14-16

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 65, 487, 338, 432, 23, 306

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#10)

**Occasion:** Lord’s Supper

**Theme:** Jesus tells the parable of the growing seed, emphasising the mystery of the powerful growth of the Kingdom of God in preparation for the coming harvest.

**Proposition:** Marvel and be prepared because the growth of God’s kingdom is mysterious, powerful and will certainly result in the coming harvest of souls.

**Introduction**

Did you know that there are at least 200,000 edible plant species on this planet? As a global human population (of 7.9 billion people) we depend on just three: maize, rice and wheat for more than half our food (caloric) intake. Together Russia and Ukraine export over a quarter of the world’s wheat. Russian gas is a key ingredient in nitrogen-based fertilizers like urea. The war in Ukraine now threats the food security of millions of people. We feel the effects of this on our supermarket shelves with higher food prices. The inflation rate hit 6.9% last week and is predicted to climb yet higher. More and more people in New Zealand are struggling to afford to eat.

In Bible times food supplies were often insecure due to disease, drought and/or war. Today, is it fundamentally any different despite all our technological sophistication? Agricultural food production critically depends on seeds. They are as vitally important for human life today as they have always been. When Jesus taught the parables of the sower, the growing seed and the mustard seed his listeners understood the vital importance of seeds. These three parables are all about the growth of the Kingdom of God.

Today we are focusing on the middle of the three which is often referred to as ‘the parable of the seed growing’. This parable only occurs in Mark’s gospel, whereas the parable of the sower is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke, as is the parable of the mustard seed. Let’s look at this uniquely Markan parable under three headings:

1. Mysterious growth
2. Potent growth
3. Completed growth
4. **Mysterious Growth (v26-27)**

I have a small greenhouse at home with a few veggies growing inside. I’ve never stood inside long enough to actually see the plants grow, but grow they certainly do. Over the course of a few days, they become larger with more leaves and thicker stems. I have worked some compost into the soil, and I periodically remove any competing weeds, but I don’t do anything that actually causes them to grow. They just to that by themselves – according to the genetic instructions marvellously programmed into the seeds. There’s absolutely nothing unusual about what I am describing. Many any of you here today have experienced the same thing in your own gardens. Yet, despite being extremely commonplace, this growth is quite remarkable. A small dead looking object (the seed) can lay dormant in a storeroom and then when sown on the ground begins to grow and is transformed into a plant which (in the case of over 200,000 varieties) becomes a source of food for people like you and me.

Jesus uses the well-known phenomenon of growth from a seed to a food crop as an illustration of the advancing Kingdom of God. This is how He begins: *“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how”* (4:26-27). The farmer, having sown the seed using the typical ‘broadcast’ method at that time, carries on his daily life. He might have covered the seed, tended the soil, removed some weeds or even artificially irrigated the land. These activities are helpful and important, but they do not directly **cause** the actual growth of the seed into a developing plant. The farmer must trust that the ‘seed will do its thing’ and he must patiently wait. He does not understand how the seed growth occurs.

Now today the genetics of plants are known in some detail, the processes of cell division, photosynthesis and nutrient uptake are well documented in the scientific literature, and yet the essential nature of life in plants remains a mystery. With all our 21st century technology, nobody has succeeded in producing living organisms from dead materials.

Ultimately, plants grow from seeds because Christ Himself enables this ‘routine’ miracle to occur. The Bible explains this mystery, which is part of the greater work of the continued functioning of this universe in these words: “*He (Christ) is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power*” (Heb 1:3). “*In Him (Christ) all things hold together*” (Col 1:17).

In this parable, Jesus is not primarily speaking of vegetation, but about the Kingdom of God. Just as the growth of plants is mysterious, so is the growth of God’s Kingdom. Whilst the Parable of the Sower stresses human responsibility, the parable of the growing seed emphasises God’s sovereignty. In Scripture, the ‘thread’ of the unchangeable divine decree of election is mysteriously, inextricably, woven together with the ‘thread’ of the active individual will of individual men, women and children like us.

God alone is the Author, Sustainer and Finisher of spiritual growth in the hearts of His people. He establishes, progresses and completes His reign in hearts and the lives of people like us. That is how the Kingdom of God mysteriously grows. You and I may be able to identify particularly times when we grew hugely in Christlikeness over a short period. This is very often during times of intense pressure, persecution, loss, grief, sickness or despair. Yet even in these circumstances, the spiritual growth is mysterious, and it is entirely the work of the Lord. For some, there may be a vivid memory of what seems to be the moment we first came to faith, but even then, what lies behind a conscious conversion experience is the mysterious work of the Spirit in first making a person spiritually alive (John 3:3).

How is all this mysterious growth as the Kingdom of God advances possible? It is because Christ, like a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, has borne much fruit (John 12:24). Today we remember His death which has mysteriously brought forth so much life and growth. Such is the power of God in the glorious gospel, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Potent Growth (v28)**

Seeds don’t look particularly powerful, but they are potent. The word ‘potent’ means ‘to have great power, influence or effect’. The profound influence (and therefore value) of seeds on this earth is reflected in over 1,700 seed banks which are being used to help preserve vital biodiversity in the world today. One of the best known is the one housed in an underground facility in the arctic. Nicknamed the ‘doomsday global seed vault’ this store is housed on Svalbard (also known as Spitzbergen), a group of islands to the north of Norway. There are over a million seeds in the underground vault there from over 6,000 different species.

The potency of seeds is revealed in global seed banks, but long before these were necessary, the potency of the seed was revealed in the words of Christ in verse 28: *“The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear”.* Here ‘earth’ means ‘the seed embedded in the earth’. In a healthy plant there is a progression from the first green shoot emerging from the ground through to the fully mature organism laden with fruit and/or edible leaves. There is great power in this progress. You have probably seen plants pushing through cracked concrete pavers, walls, or pipes. They start out as thin, soft stems but can sometimes move hard rocks apart with their force as they grow.

It is characteristic of the might work of God that He uses the small and seemingly insignificant to bring about the growth of His Kingdom. Remember Daniel’s interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream about the might image with a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet of clay? This great statue was destroyed when struck by a stone ‘*that became a great mountain and filled the whole earth*’ (Dan 2:35).

Today we remember the death of Christ, the One to whom that stone pointed. He was ‘*despised and rejected by men*’. He was not esteemed (Isa 53:3). Yet, He is the long-promised Messiah in whom the kingdom of God has come. He is the Mighty Vine to whom are grafted in many branches who draw their life, their vitality, their growth and their fruit from Him. Jesus said: “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Brothers and sisters, we grow because He is the potent plant, and by faith we are organically connected to Him, just as your body is joined to your head.

The gospel ‘*is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*’ (Rom 1:16). As we proclaim the gospel, the potency of God to save His people accompanies our words. It can seem at times as though we are ‘sowing’ to little or no effect in the lives of others. Gospel ministry can seem futile and ineffective at times. This can be a source of discouragement and even despair. However, it is because of the powerful growth that the Lord sovereignly produces in those He loves that He calls us to persevere whilst trusting in His strength.

Job was a ’blameless and upright’ (Job 1:1) man of God who refused to ‘charge God with wrong’ (1:22) when he was greatly afflicted. God’s Word worked powerfully in his life, bringing him to greater faith and faithfulness and ultimately restored to him much of what was lost. The Lord, through James, calls us to be patient like Job (5:11) until the coming of the Lord (5:7). God will continue to powerfully advance His Kingdom until the return of Christ (Phil 1:6). This is the harvest that Jesus speaks about in this parable and is the focus of our third point:

1. **Completed Growth (v29)**

Jesus concludes this parable with these words “*But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.*" (v29). You may remember from a Deuteronomy sermon last year that in the Jewish Calendar all three major festivals (Passover, Firstfruits and Weeks) were directly connected to the harvesting of crops. People back then anticipated harvest time because that was when much of their food supply was gathered in. In our largely urban New Zealand society we are much more removed from the harvesting of food crops than those who first heard Jesus teach the parable of the growing seed.

In Scripture the image of the harvest coming serves **both** as a warning of great danger **and** as a promise of great blessing. The harvest is an image of the coming Day of Judgement. We heard this from the prophet Joel earlier: “*Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great*” (Joel 3:13). In the book of Revelation, Christ is revealed as ‘*one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand’ because ‘the harvest of the earth is fully ripe*’ (Rev 14:15). The grape harvest pictured in this vision is gathered and thrown into ‘*the great winepress of the wrath of God*’ (Rev 14:19).

As we celebrate Lord’s Supper today, we ‘*proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes*’ (1 Cor 11:26). We are anticipating the coming great harvest of souls. We are looking forward to the Day when Christ will return in glory to judge all people who have ever lived. On that great day every single person will submit to Christ the King and confess that He is Lord (Phil 2:10-11). Some will experience a wretched regret – why did I not willingly accept His Lordship whilst I had the opportunity? On that day it will be too late. In the imagery of this parable, the harvest time will have come, the time for seed germination and growth will have past.

Hear the warning of the Lord: “*If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*” (Rev 20:15). In the words of the hymn “Day of Judgement!, Day of wonders!” which we’ll sing shortly, “*Careless sinner, what then will become of thee?*”. The Kingdom of God is mysteriously, potently, most certainly, advancing to the Day of Judgement when “*we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*”.

The only way of escape is to come to Christ in faith. He has received what is due to people like you and me in His body on the cross. We remember the judgement of God that fell on Him in place of us when we eat the bread and drink the wine at the Table of the Lord. This parable is a gospel call to come to Jesus and shed the burden of trying to live this life in your own strength (Matt 11:28-30). He is the only way that people like you can find peace in a world at war; both between the nations and within our own souls rent by internal conflict apart from Christ.

In Scripture the harvest coming serves both as a warning of great danger and as a promise of great blessing. An Old Testament image of peace is expressed as restful food security “*every man under his vine and under his fig tree*” (e.g. 1 King 4:25; Mic 4:4). The harvest is a time of great blessing at the completion of the growth of a crop. The harvest brings bountiful benefits to those who are able to enjoy the fruit. This is pictured by the prophet Joel in these words: "*And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Valley of Shittim*” (Joel 3:18). The Old Testament harvest festivals point forward to the great celebration by the great multitude who are invited to the marriage of the Lamb (Rev 19:7). We look forward to this coming harvest festival today as we celebrate Lord’s Supper.

Brother and sister, perhaps you are feeling discouraged today. The spiritual growth you see in yourself (and perhaps in others) seems so small, or perhaps you can’t see any at all? Be encouraged and assured today that the Kingdom of God is advancing to final fulfilment. The growth of this Kingdom is mysterious, powerful and will one day be finished. Remember that “*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Phil 1:6). Continue to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen*” (2 Peter 3:18).

Amen