**From small beginnings to great blessings**

Text: Mark 4:30-34

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**Scriptures:** Daniel 4:8-12; Mark 4:30-34

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 46, 485, 393, 22b, 513

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#11)

**Theme:** Jesus tells a parable about a small mustard seed that grows into a large bush which is a blessing to many birds in order to portray the growth of God’s Kingdom from a small and seemingly insignificant beginning into a vast realm which provides great blessing for many

**Proposition:** Be greatly encouraged, small things matter in God’s Kingdom!

**Introduction**

There are many tiny things in this world. Do you think that very small things are important? Your teeth are relatively small, but they can really hurt if the tiny nerves in your mouth are sending you a painful signal. The Sars-CoV-2 virus – 100x smaller than a small grain of sand {0.1-0.5 micrometre in diameter (cf. fine beach sand 90 micro meters, grain of salt 60 micron) but it makes some people very sick. It has been estimated that if you saved and invested just $1 each day over a 65-year period you would have about $1.9 million dollars in the end. The small financial, physical, relational and spiritual decisions we make every day tend to compound in life resulting in substantial outcomes; for better or for worse.

Small things do matter. Most of the time for most of us, life is a series of tiny events and circumstances. The Bible reveals the importance of small things in many places for example: “*For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice*” (Zech 4:10a); “*A little leaven leavens the whole lump*” (Gal 5:9); “*So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!*” (James 3:5)

We know that God did not chose His covenant people Israel because they were a mighty nation, quite the opposite, as Moses explains: "*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples*” (Deut 7:6-7).

The book of Mark is the smallest in length of the four gospels. Matthew and Luke both record more than 20 parables each. Whereas Mark has just four {and a few parabolic sayings - The Strong Man (Mk 3:23-27) and The Parable of the Fig Tree (Mk 13:28-31)}. Three of the four parables in Mark appear in a group in the fourth chapter. All the parables in Mark identify Jesus:

* In the Parable of the Sower (Mk 4:3-8) – He is the Sower of the gospel.
* In the Parable of the Seed that Grows Itself (Mk 4:26-29) He is the Divine Sustainer of the Universe (Col 1:17) and the coming Judge at harvest time.
* In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mk 4:30-32) – When He first taught this parable, He was the physical manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth. Now, after His ascension, His Body, the church, is a physical manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth.
* The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mk 12:1-9) is about Himself as the Son of God.

This morning our focus is on the third kingdom-growth parable which is often called ‘*the parable of the mustard seed*’. Let’s look at what Jesus is teaching here under three headings:

1. The small beginnings of the Kingdom
2. The expansive growth of the Kingdom
3. The protective growth of the Kingdom
4. **The small beginnings of the Kingdom (v30-31)**

If someone asked you what New Zealand is, you could describe the geography of our islands and show them our location in the South Pacific on a map. You could also say that we are a country ruled by an elected government who have jurisdiction over the nation that is called New Zealand or Aotearoa.

What would you say if someone asked you what the Kingdom of God is? Knowing that a kingdom is the territory over which a king reigns, you might say that since God is the Creator of all things, His realm must extend over the whole world, in fact over the entire Universe (Psalm 50:10). That is true, but it is **not** the meaning of the term ‘the Kingdom of God’ as it is used in the Bible. We have already heard in Mark’s gospel that Jesus began His earthly ministry in Galilee, ‘*proclaiming the gospel and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*’ (1:14-15). The Kingdom of God is the messianic kingdom where God’s appointed Messiah will **not only** be the Redeemer of His people but **also** their King.

You may well know that the Hebrew word transliterated ‘Messiah’ means ‘anointed one’, in Greek ‘Christ’. As we saw in the first sermon in this series, the key question that Mark answers in his gospel can be simply expressed as ‘who is Jesus?’. He gives the answer in summary form in his introduction in what we know as chapter 1 verse 1: “*The beginning of the gospel of* ***Jesus Christ, the Son of God***”. As we saw at the start of this sermon series, Mark begins his gospel with an Old Testament quote from Isaiah to show that the promised Messiah was foretold long before he arrived.

When Jesus came to this earth, the Messianic Kingdom of God began. Jesus starts this parable with these words: *“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth”.* You may know that the mustard seed is **not** the smallest seed on earth. The black mustard plant (brassica nigra), found in present day Israel, is about 1mm in diameter, whereas the smallest known seed is that of the jewel orchid (Anoectochilus imitans) with a diameter of about 0.05mm.That’s 20x smaller in size than a mustard seed.

How then can we rightly understand the words of Jesus in this parable? Think about this: we have an expression in English ‘they wouldn’t hurt a fly’. It describes a harmless person or animal. The common house flies (Musca domestica) we see are not the smallest or most vulnerable creatures on earth. The mymarid is the tiniest insect on earth (also called the ‘fairy fly’). It is about ten times smaller than the house fly. In the Jewish culture, the mustard seed was proverbially the smallest seed, just as the common house fly is proverbially the smallest most vulnerable creature in our English idiom. Jesus did not always speak literally, any more than we do.

Christ Himself is the small mustard seed from whom the Kingdom of God begins. Whilst He existed in the beginning with God (John 1:1) and He is and has always been the unchangeable and eternal (Heb 13:8) Son of God, He began life on this earth as a tiny human being. He was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20). He grew up in the small Galilean town of Nazareth, not as a prince, or as a member of a wealthy, influential family, but as part of the family of Joseph, a carpenter (Matt 13:55). He did not begin His public ministry in Jerusalem, the central city of Roman-occupied Israel, but in the relatively remote region of Galilee. He did not select a large group of especially gifted, powerful, and extraordinary people to be His disciples, but instead He chose twelve very ordinary men.

His Kingdom did not begin with a triumphal procession leading a large army, nor did He at first sit on a throne. He came in a very small way, preaching and teaching, calling all who heard Him to ‘*repent and believe the gospel*’. In this parable Jesus foreshadows His death and burial when He says of the mustard seed that it is ‘*sown in the ground*’ (cf. John 12:24). The Kingdom of God began in a very small way with the coming of Jesus.

His rule begins in a small way in the hearts of people like you and me when we respond in faith to His call to: “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me*” (Matt 11:28-29). The reign of Christ begins in ‘small’ ordinary people like you and me. It doesn’t look very large at first, but the Kingdom of God does not remain small, it grows, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The expansive growth of the Kingdom (v32a)**

The Big Bang theory is a scientific model that seeks to explain the origin of the Universe. This theory proposes that all the matter that exists first started as an infinitesimally small ‘singularity’ and then rapidly expanded into what we observe from earth today – galaxies that appear to be moving farther away from us. Nobody can explain how such a small start is possible for such a large universe, nor what started the process of expansion, nor where the material that made up the tiny, incredibly dense ‘singularity’ came from.

We know that this universe started from nothing and then God spoke, and it came into being (Heb 11:3). We also know that the Kingdom of God started with a small beginning as Christ the promised Messiah took on flesh. We know that His kingdom has expanded and will continue to grow to be huge in size. This is what He says of His kingdom: *“It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches”.* Mustard seeds don’t grow into what we would call a ‘tree’ with a woody trunk, bark and big branches (although under the right growing conditions they can become four meters or more in height). The mustard plant is quite common in the Near East and is often considered to be a weed because it can spread and grow quickly. We have already noted that the growth of the Kingdom is the central theme of the three parables in Mark 4. The emphasis in this third parable is on the eventual huge size of the Kingdom of God as compared to its small beginning.

You may know that Elon Musk’s business empire has expanded hugely through his entrepreneurial endeavours with companies including PayPal, SpaceX and Tesla. Now he has purchased the online social networking service Twitter. He is currently the wealthiest person on earth. He was born into a wealthy family in Pretoria, South Africa, so although his wealth has grown hugely, he did start with more than a little. Vladimir Putin came from a poor family (his mother was a factory worker and his father a conscript in the Soviet Navy), but he now controls a vast nation as President of the Russian Federation. He has an immense influence on world events at the present time as Russia continues to engage in warfare against Ukraine whilst controlling vast quantities of essential commodities like oil, gas and wheat. The expansion of God’s Kingdom is far greater than that of the realms controlled by Elon Musk or Vladimir Putin.

The prophet Habakkuk predicted that: “*The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (Hab 2:14). From the smallest of beginnings with the coming of Jesus Christ to Palestine, the Kingdom of the Messiah now extends all over this planet. Unlike the business empire of Elon Musk or the economic, military and political influence of Vladimir Putin, the Kingdom of God will never end. The Kingdom of God is a vast realm that includes people of different races and backgrounds who willingly submit themselves to the Lordship of King Jesus. Remember Jesus said to Pontius Pilate “*My kingdom is not of this world*’ (John 18:36).

Bible scholar Graeme Goldsworthy expresses the essence of the Kingdom of God as “*God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule*”. This kingdom is a spiritual domain at present. When Jesus returns, His kingdom will then be **both** spiritual **and also** a physical realm in the New Heavens and New Earth. This kingdom is not in essence a materially wealthy realm although it is a realm of immeasurable riches (Eph 3:8) which are shared amongst the citizens of the kingdom as an inheritance (Eph 1:14,18; Col 3:24; Heb 9:15).

As the gospel continues to be proclaimed, God is expanding His Kingdom as His people come to saving faith in Jesus. The complete number of people in the Kingdom of God is revealed in the book of Revelation to be 144,000 (Rev 14:1). This number is symbolic (12x12x1000) being 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7:5-8). We don’t know how many people will be part of the Kingdom of God at the close of this age when Christ returns, but we do know that the number will be large, as this parable predicts.

The Kingdom of God includes people like you and me from ‘*every tribe, tongue and nation*’ (Rev 5:9; 13:7; 14:6). At times in a local congregation surrounded by so many people in this country who do not profess Christ it can seem as though the Kingdom of God is not very large at all. When people leave the church, it may seem that in some ways that the Kingdom of God is actually contracting, not expanding. It’s helpful to remember that the Kingdom of God is bigger than the visible church and that at different times and places in history it can seem as though it is very small.

This parable of the mustard seed gives us the ‘big picture’ of the expansion over time of Christ’s mighty Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is growing and enlarging to include a huge number of people who call on the name of the Lord, coming to Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Are you one of these people? Do you know the blessings of this vast Kingdom that has grown from such a small beginning? Let’s focus on these as we come to our third point:

1. **The protective growth of the Kingdom (v32b-34)**

It is estimated that almost 8 million people have left Ukraine as refugees since the war began there in February 2022. 90% of these refugees are vulnerable women and children. They have no place of permanent shelter and security. Living safely in a home where you are protected is a great blessing – one which is pictured in this parable.

The mustard seed in the parable Jesus teaches grows so large for a reason. Jesus explains *“so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. (v32)".* The mustard plant is pictured as a realm of refuge for many birds and their young offspring. It is a place of safety and security. We find the same image in the book of Daniel when Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a tree that grew so large that ‘*its top reached to heaven*’ and ‘*the birds of the heavens lived in its branches*’ (Dan 4:12).

In the parable of the sower, ‘*some seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it*’ (4:4). Here Satan is represented by predatory birds. There is a connection in some places in the Old Testament where birds were agents of evil (e.g. 1 Kings:3-4). It is always helpful to remember that the same image can be used in Scripture to depict different things. For example leaven can represent sin or corruption (e.g. 1 Cor 5:1-8), but also elsewhere the growing kingdom of God (e.g. Matt 13:33).

Here in this parable the nesting birds clearly do not depict evil, they embody smallness**.** We see this elsewhere in these words of Christ: “*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows*” (Matt 10:29-30). This parable reveals the reality that despite the vastness of His Kingdom, Christ cares for His people, small and vulnerable though they are. His Kingdom is a place of refuge, a place to permanently settle and to be safe and secure. The Kingdom of God has grown and continues to grow into a realm where all of the citizens of this vast realm are fully protected. Jesus said, “*My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*” (John 10:29).

What does being in the ‘shade’ of Christ’s protection mean for people like you and me? It means that there is no reason for us to fear anything or anybody in this world (e.g. John 16:33).

Seemingly insignificant ‘small’ people like you and me are of great value to Christ. He gave His life up for people like us. We can ‘settle into’ willingly living with Christ as our Lord and Saviour knowing that we shall always be protected in His Kingdom, both in this life and in the next. See how much glorious truth Jesus reveals in just a few words as He speaks about the growth of a small mustard seed!

At the end, Mark records: “*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything*” (Mark 4:33-34). Jesus gave private instruction to His disciples, explaining the ‘mystery’ (4:11) of the Kingdom – that He is the Christ, the promised Messiah with whom the Kingdom has come. To the crowds, His true identity was still veiled.

Later in this gospel, Mark records the question Jesus asked His disciples ‘*who do you say that I am?*’ (8:29) to which Peter, speaking on behalf of them all, said “*You are the Christ*”. They had seen (amongst other things) the person of Jesus revealed through a parable about a mustard seed. A small seed growing to be so large that it provided protective shelter for many birds. One of the twelve disciples, Judas Iscariot seems to have expected Jesus to be the King of an earthly kingdom that would overthrow the oppressive foreign Roman government in Israel. He did not know who Jesus really is. The other eleven disciples, after Christ’s resurrection, became so sure about King Jesus and the eternal protection that is only to be found in His Kingdom that they were willing to live, suffer and die as they proclaimed the gospel.

How about you? Do you see Jesus and His kingdom revealed in the parable of the mustard seed? Are you sheltering, safe and secure, under His protective shade today? The economic and military kingdoms of this world will pass away, but the kingdom of God will endure forever. It is a realm where small and vulnerable people like you and me find lasting refuge and security in Christ the glorious King.

AMEN