**GROWING GOD’S MIRACLE KINGDOM**

**Ezekiel 17:22-24. Mark 4: 26-34. Sermon by Sarah Maybury 13.6.21**

Let us pray: The Collect for Trinity 2 – ‘*Father Creator, whose mercy never fails; deepen our faithfulness to You + to Your living* ***Word****, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen’*

Have you ever tried to retell a funny story or joke, only to have it fall flat on its face the second time around? Add two thousand years between the telling and this is especially likely to happen.
The parables of Jesus come from a distant time, an unfamiliar place, a completely different culture than the one in which **we** experience church. How are we to grasp what first century, predominately Jewish listeners likely did, when Jesus told a parable saying;
“The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his garden; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32 **Mark 4:30-32**, Luke 13:18-19)
A mustard seed becoming a tree? Could Jesus have got it wrong? Are we missing something? I wonder if Jesus might be saying this: The mustard seed is very small. When the Sower plants it, little more than a shrub is expected. But God can and will use it to do great things?

Our 21st century ears might miss the Old Testament passages to which Jesus alludes. We hear in Ezekiel 17 that the Kingdom of God is being compared to a cutting from a cedar tree that God plants. The cutting grows into a huge tree that all the birds come and make nests in it… sound familiar?
Jesus uses the same words but with a subtle or not so subtle twist…

Jesus starts with a mustard seed! Many of which are needed to fill a thimble!

Where the kingdom of God is concerned, we can be surprised, our expectations are so often exceeded! When we invite people to Jimmy’s Kitchen or for me, when people were invited to the monthly ‘Bring and Share lunch’ at Cathedral Close…. more people came than were expected!

One church member finds out who is lonely and isolated or which families are on free school dinners and creates a contact list; others bake cakes, another chats to neighbours, others deliver shopping or hampers, others pray and make phone calls. As Paul explains, when we sow grace and love with our prayers and actions, God can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Where I volunteer at Central Foodbank, many clients who receive Food Parcels want to give back something, they volunteer their time to help others who are in similar situations to theirs. Could it be that the smallest of seeds, the humble, the outcast, the sinner, those that we ignore or dismiss or devalue, will become great and produce the abundant fruit of the kingdom? When we sow grace and love with our prayers and actions, God can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine

There’s more to this parable than the title ‘Kingdom miracle growth’ suggests. In Jesus’ day, mustard shrubs were weeds. Perhaps it should be translated “the kingdom of God is like dandelion seed, which, when someone takes it and sows it in their lawn….” Dandelions in the lawn! Need I say more? A Jewish Mishnah (The original written version of the Jewish oral law which supplements the Torah) forbids sowing mustard seeds in your garden because, according to it, “they are useless, annoying weeds.”

Nonetheless, ordinary people would grow mustard elsewhere because it was a cheap spice and useful for medicinal purposes. I bought a huge bag of black mustard seeds grown in India from a lovely shop in Undercliffe to share with you all, to help visualize the size of the mustard seed.

This analogy of Mustard Seeds would have put off some of Jesus’ listeners, especially the righteous and well-to-do ones (the ones with the pristine, weed free gardens)! “How can an unclean thing, a forbidden weed, be like the kingdom of God?” Jesus had to have been smiling when he told this parable!

His chuckle begs the question: could it be that the kingdom of God has more to do with weeds in a back yard than an organized manicured garden?
I wonder if God ‘by-passes’ the powers and principalities, the authorities and kingdoms of this world and uses the rejected instead?
I wonder if the kingdom of God is sown in all of the messes and earthiness of our lives? I wonder if the kingdom of God might be sown in all of my uncleanness, and grow into something good and beautiful and larger than life? I wonder if the kingdom of God could come to our hearts and to our homes and be planted in us? Could it come to BD2 and to the districts in Bradford where we live and to nations that haven’t got it all figured out, who aren’t ‘polished and sorted out’, who seem to be more like dandelions than roses, whose people are perhaps living in Bradford without leave to remain as Asylum seekers or refugees?

I wonder what illustration you might use to describe what God’s kingdom is like? *Describe one glimpse of the Kingdom of God, that comes to your mind, with another person.*

This tree, this Kingdom, Jesus says, is a home for the birds of the air. “Birds of the air” in the Old Testament is most often a reference to Gentiles or non-Jews. These outsiders were often portrayed in a negative way. But not by Jesus.
This parable describes the kingdom tree as a home and shelter for **all** the birds of the air, **all** the outsiders! **All** are welcomed, belong, are invited to flourish! There are no ‘non-native’ species in God’s kingdom.

What if we said ‘Let’s be community? Let’s take responsibility for and care about those around us, our neighbours, and neighbourhoods.
Let’s recognize that God is amongst the ordinary everyday people that live near where we live. The Lord of the heavens and earth resides in Bolton’s Streets. His Kingdom is not established by weapons, power, wealth, manipulation, command, and control. His kingdom is established by feeding the hungry, providing shelter for those on the margins and by loving our neighbours—whether they look and smell like us or not.

The text presents us with a choice. Parables are never just given for information; they demand a response. They are not designed just to sharpen our thinking, but to shape our lives. So, I wonder: do we put our trust in imperial trees, or in Jesus’ weed seed?

Do we imagine the Kingdom in our religiously appointed pews, rules, rituals, and righteousness or in the everyday, weedy stuff of our lives rooted in Christ?
Two thousand years ago an unlikely handful of weed seeds, filled with the Holy Spirit, spread through the mighty Roman Empire like dandelions! How might it grow, spread, flourish today?

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed. Seeds left in the cupboard do nothing.
How are we sowing? Someone took and sowed in her field, in her neighbourhood. The old axiom applies, **bloom where you’re planted, as you are, where you are**.

May we take the Kingdom weed-seed we’ve been given, however small and insignificant we imagine it to be, and sow it in our lives and in the lives of those around us.
In so doing, may we trust and believe in, and dream of the day when, by the power of the Spirit, it grows up to become the greatest of all shrubs, bringing forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its branches. Amen