

# **Sermon: His Kingdom is unstoppable**

## **Mark 4:26-34**

*Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt*

Our Lord Jesus was probably a carpenter, because the husband of his mother was a carpenter. So Jesus knew how to make doors, and windows, and benches. I suspect, however, that Jesus as a young man worked more in the fields of his family than in the carpentry workshop.

If you see how presently here in Egypt life is organised in the villages, it is most likely that even a carpenter would often also work on his little plot of land.

The Bible never mentions that Jesus and his family had their own land, but it seems likely to me, and this is confirmed by the fact that Jesus so often uses stories and examples from agriculture for proclaiming the Gospel. He understood farming.

I do not understand farming. I have for instance some very bad experiences with planting some bamboo in my front yard in Holland years ago. I bought a gorgeous bamboo plant, and on a rainy day I planted it in the front yard.

It grew fantastic. But the neighbour hated me for it because after a few months, everywhere in my and in his garden, sprouts of bamboo were shooting up, in all sorts of unwanted locations.

Silly me, I did not realise the bamboo would be like an unstoppable weed.

Before you think I am totally dumb when it comes to gardens and farming, I do know that skimmed milk and full cream milk come from the same cows.

Well, to our Parable now. In the days of Jesus, the mustard seed was the smallest seed known in Israel, and if you planted it in the ground, a large bush would grow up fast.

The shrub could grow as high as 2 or 3 meters in one season, and it would be about as wide. You planted a tiny seed in the ground and soon you would have a large massive bush!

In Jesus' time, mustard was not known as something that could be used in the kitchen. Mustard was known for its healing powers.

The Roman historian Pliny the Elder, in his series of books called Natural History (77 AD), writes that

Mustard . . . with its spicy taste and burning effect is extremely beneficial for the health.

The seeds were crushed, made into a paste, and applied to parts of the body that were hurting. Even in our days, this is still done. I understand that this paste of mustard, when applied to the skin has such burning effect that it helps people forget their actual problem.

Jesus tells us the story of the mustard seed to teach about the Kingdom of God. In his days, the Jewish nation had its own conceptions of this Kingdom: King Messiah would come with the armies of God and wipe out the Romans, freeing Israel to live under His rule in peace and prosperity. It meant the end of any oppression and total freedom for God's people.

But the Kingdom parables of Jesus were designed to show us the true nature of that Kingdom, which was very different from those Jewish expectations of triumph.

### **1 Christ is the seed and the tree**

Let me begin by quoting St Ambrose, bishop of Milan in Italy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote in one of his Bible commentaries that the seed in this parable must be compared to Jesus Christ himself. Ambrose said,

He is a grain when taken, a tree when He revives [...] a grain when buried in the earth, a tree when He rises up to heaven.

This idea is not good, as Jesus said of himself: 'I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds'.  
John 12:24

Christ is only a little seed in the eyes of men. He was born in Judea; He lived in obscure Nazareth, in despised Galilee. He then taught for two or three years in neighbouring villages, and occasionally in Jerusalem; He made a few converts; and then falling into the hands of his enemies, died the shameful death, nailed to a cross. A small seed indeed.

But we know, He rose, and ascended to the Father, and that small seed that died, proved to be the mighty Lord, ruler of heaven and earth, seated at the right hand of God the Father, He will come back one day to judge the living and the dead.

Seen in this light, this parable encourages the disciples of Jesus to not be deeply depressed when they were to see the moment when the seed was planted, when Christ would die on the cross. Because a new day would dawn, the day of resurrection and new life.

### **2 The Gospel message is the seed**

Another church father, Saint Jerome, lived at the same time as Bishop Ambrose. He traveled widely, and he also visited Egypt a few times to visit our monasteries. According to him, the mustard seed points to the message about Christ.

The preaching of the Gospel is the least of all teachings. In the first place, it seems improbable: It preaches [...] a God Who dies, and the scandal of the Cross. Compare this teaching with what the philosophers say, with their books and brilliant oratory, with the composition of their speeches and you will see how the seed of the Gospel is the least of all these seeds.

The Gospel does not look like much. It seems insignificant. But if someone actually believes, see what happens! Trust Christ and invite him into your life and it is the most transforming, the most revolutionary thing that can occur to you.

For 20 centuries, the Gospel of Christ has been proclaimed and it has succeeded to attract more and more and more people to Jesus Christ, and they have been satisfied with that. Because Jesus Christ is at its center of the message.

It is great to look at the worldwide Church and enjoy its growth almost in every continent. There are more Christians on earth than ever before, and percentage-wise the church is larger than ever before. The message is believed!

This must not lead us to triumphalism. We must never forget that the Church is rooted in the Gospel message of a dying Lord, and the Church – St Michael's included – is best and strongest, when we are aware that we totally depend on that initial seed and on that DNA that runs in our veins, Jesus Christ. Victory is not by strength or by power but by dying to this world with Christ. It is not about ruling but about serving.

Our lives are at their best, when we continue to be aware of Jesus Christ – our Lord – at the core of our existence. And if he is at the heart of our life, we die with him to this world, to our own ambitions that focus on ourselves.

### **3 Another Angle**

Let me also share a very different approach to this parable. I already quoted Pliny the Elder about the medicinal powers of the mustard seed. He said more, and this is very important for understanding this parable:

Mustard [...] grows entirely wild. [And...] when once it has been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls sprouts at once.

Hey! That reminds me of my bamboo! If you have a mustard shrub in your garden, the seeds fall everywhere and grow fast. You realise what we call this?

A weed. The mustard plant is dangerous for your garden. If you plant it, you will suffer for it.

The Jews in Jesus' days were aware of this problem with the mustard shrub. They were like the scholars of Islam today; they created rules for the details of life. In the Jewish Tosephta, a collection of traditions, the Jews were told:

Mustard seed [...] may not be planted in a garden.

The audience of Jesus was aware that planting mustard seed in a garden would lead to massive problems. Don't do it! It is haraam!

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that Jesus told the story of the mustard seed about a man who planted the seed 'in his garden'.

**17 June 2006, St John's, Maadi; 15+17 June 2012, 12 June 2015, St Michael's, Heliopolis**

The people who listened to Jesus were not surprised that he said that the seed grew as large as a tree and that the birds enjoyed it. That was normal. They were, however, *alerted* by his statement about planting the seed in a garden. You don't do that in your garden! Are you crazy?

Gardens in those days were not for pleasure, but for growing vegetables, urgently needed for food and for staying alive. The little backyard was full of lettuce, some beans, watermelons and more. To keep those free of weed was of utmost importance. Your life depended on the food!

Not only would the big shrub throw its seeds all over your garden, so that you got mustard seed everywhere.

But secondly, it also created shadow so the other vegetables would not grow. You could say good buy to your veggies!

And thirdly, the birds would come and enjoy the shrub and nest in it. Well - who wants lots of birds in his vegetable garden! Birds create big damage, as they will eat all seeds that you carefully plant and they drop other unwanted seeds as well.

The point is not just that the mustard plant starts as a small seed and grows into a big shrub, it is that the shrub takes over where it is not wanted, and it gets out of control. And that, said Jesus, is what the Kingdom is like: It is unstoppable, uncontrollable, unpredictable.

It is growing in all directions, and even when it is temporarily suppressed, its plants will shoot up again at all places. In spite of all resistance against it, in spite of many efforts of governments to destroy it, in spite of evil rulers, in spite of other religions that want to replace it, in spite of our own smallness and weakness, in spite of the strange message of a dying Lord, the Christian message has from its beginning attracted more and more people to Christ. It has grown into a phenomenal tree –called the church. unstoppable, uncontrollable, unpredictable.

The message of Jesus Christ has shown itself to be as powerful as Christ himself. Many have tried to suppress it and many have tried to destroy it. But Christ and his church have grown to be a mighty plant in the garden of this world.

The Kingdom of God is growing and growing. The message of Christ has spread 'like a weed'. It is unstoppable, as our strong Jesus Christ is at its heart. What a story of 20 centuries. All over the world people meet and celebrate His death and resurrection.

And there is a personal warning in this parable for us: Be careful. If you think you can handle or manage the Kingdom of God, you are mistaken. If you think you can be a follower of Christ while at the same time arranging the garden of your life as you like it, forget it. That attitude is not only unwanted, but it does not work.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ will have unforeseen consequences, as He is in control, and you are not. He may shake your life and put it upside down. Because He is the Lord.

**17 June 2006, St John's, Maadi; 15+17 June 2012, 12 June 2015, St Michael's, Heliopolis**

## **Conclusion**

Jesus Christ and the message of our Lord have been planted in your life. The little seed, seemingly despicable as it died in the ground, has us in its grip. It grows, and sprouts, and the carefully planned gardens of our lives are completely changed by Jesus Christ.

That is why we are here. He works in us. And his presence in our thoughts and in our hearts leads to growth and change in our lives.

And we, together, are all part of His Kingdom that cannot be stopped. No powers in this world can cancel His rule. In your life and in this world, He is victorious, against all odds. Against all regimes, all religions, all sin, all problems.

Our God reigns, and he does that in your life - because of that small seed of faith planted in your heart and mind.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen