

The Kingdom of God as a Mustard Seed

Anna Svernedal

The kingdom of God is the central theme in Jesus' preaching.¹ Mark declares the start of Jesus ministry by this summary statement; 'Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."' (Mark 1:15).² The people were amazed because Jesus was teaching with authority and power (Luke 4:32, 36). He reigned, but not as an earthly king. The Jews were waiting for the Messiah, the coming King, who would establish the rule of God in the land of Israel. As the Messiah, Jesus brought healing, deliverance and redemption to his people, 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt 11:4-6, 6:10). Although spiritual, his kingdom is not just 'in heaven', or 'in our spirit', it has truly earthly dimensions, and eventually it will subvert all the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus openly demonstrated the kingdom by healing and deliverance, but the ethics and principles of the kingdom he taught partly in parables, using metaphors to plant the truth in people's hearts, hiding the whole truth about his kingdom until it was time for it to be revealed. I will now explore the parable of the kingdom of God as the mustard seed and see if there is a hidden truth in the small mustard seed that grows up to become a tree, even though the natural mustard plant is only a big shrub. I want to examine if it is just a story about 'extensive growth' as C.F. Carson describes it, or if it has more to say.⁴

The kingdom of God

Directly after his baptism and temptations, Jesus begins to proclaim that the kingdom has come. In Nazareth, he reads the Messianic prophecy from Isaiah 61, proclaiming the year of God's favour and points to himself by saying 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). The people are offended and try to kill him, but

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 47.

² James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus remembered; Christianity in the Making, Vol 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eernans Publishing Company, 2003), 383.

⁴ C.F. Carson cited in Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 287.

he leaves and walks away from them. When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask if he is the one they are waiting for, he points back to the same scripture and adds, 'and blessed is he who is not offended because of Me' (Matt 11:1-6). Then Jesus continues to speak about John the Baptist and states that now is a new time. Before John the 'prophets and the law prophesied' but from his days the kingdom has been 'advancing with force' and 'forceful people are taking hold of it' (Matt 11:12). There is a shift and the kingdom has come, it is so near that anyone that is willing can reach it. Jesus not only taught about the kingdom, he 'believed that the kingdom of God was breaking into history in himself'.⁵ Origen declared that Jesus is the 'absolute kingdom', *autobasileia*, 'the very kingdom itself in person'.⁶

Basileia is Greek for kingdom, meaning not so much territory, but rather 'the right and authority to rule over a kingdom'.⁷ Jesus proclaimed his right to reign in the kingdom of God and his message was profoundly subversive.⁸ There were powers and authorities in Palestine that wanted to rule: Rome, Herod Antipas and the scribes, along with different movements among the Jews, and they all were offended by his claims to be the Messiah, the rightful King of the Jews. But Jesus was not sent to start a war, he hid his message in parables so that his opponents would not see, hear or understand. The full truth was only for those who believed and belonged to the Kingdom (Matt 13:11-13).

Why parables?

Jesus hid his subversive message in parables, but parables were also a way of planting a seed of a challenging message that would eventually be revealed. As C.H. Dodd states:

"At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."⁹

⁵ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel; The original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 100.

⁶ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 14.7* cited in McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 100.

⁷ New Testament Greek Lexicon, BibleStudyTools, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/basileia.html>.

⁸ Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the victory of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 235.

⁹ Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1961), 16.

Abstract realities are hard to comprehend; metaphors are used to give them structure and create pictures that explain the reality. The kingdom of God is something abstract, built up by two words, 'kingdom' and 'God'.¹⁰ Jesus' kingdom was different. It was neither an earthly kingdom that would overthrow the rule from Rome, nor an abstract distant rule of God that was so holy that it could not be mentioned. Jesus was redefining the kingdom of God, and to make this new reality comprehensible, he described the kingdom with metaphors from daily life, like a sower or a seed, a dragnet, or a pearl of great value that would cost all to buy (Matt 13).¹¹ Another metaphor is the mustard seed, used to describe the small amount of faith we actually need to remove obstacles in our lives; or as the kingdom of God, insignificant in the beginning, but eventually impacting the ends of the earth (Matt 17:20, Matt 13:31-32). We will now look closer at this later application of the mustard seed.

The kingdom of God as a mustard seed (Matt 13:31-32)

Mustard – the smallest of all seeds...

The mustard plant was common in the eastern world and oil from pounded mustard seeds was used for its pungent taste as seasoning in food and as treatment for medical problems.¹² According to Pliny, mustard was an antidote to poisonous fungi and mixed with vinegar it was applied on scorpion stings and serpent bites. It was also helpful for toothache, phlegm, stomach pain, menstruation and urinary problems. Together with other substances, it was used for curing almost every type of disease.¹³

Today the mustard seed is most known because of its smallness, probably because Jesus refers to this smallness when he teaches about faith like a mustard seed, that can move the greatest thing, even a mountain (Matt 17:20). In the rabbinic teaching the small mustard seed was at times 'associated with uncleanness' such as a woman's menstruation and therefore sexual discharge.¹⁴ But for Jesus small faith is

¹⁰ Bernard B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable - A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 301-303.

¹¹ Wright, *Jesus and the victory of God*, 241.

¹² Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 373-387 and Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: a commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 395.

¹³ Pliny, *Natural History* cited in Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 380.

¹⁴ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 381.

not unclean; it is actually good faith even if we as humans desire the greatness rather than the tiny start. The kingdom may initially appear insignificant but it has a distinct and wonderful taste as well as the power to overcome both diseases and the devil's attacks.

...sowed by a man in his field.

Mustard grows wild and if the seed is planted in a field or a garden, it is almost impossible to get rid of it 'as the seed when it falls germinates at once'.¹⁵ In fact it was not appropriate for a Jew to plant mustard in a garden, as in the version of this parable written in Luke 13, or in a whole field as in Matthew, because that would be a violation of the law of diverse kinds (Lev 19:19). This law was given to maintain the order in creation. 'Order represents holiness, and disorder uncleanness.'¹⁶ Seed was grown in fields, vegetables in gardens and mixing grain and vegetables was forbidden. Mustard could be sown in a small patch of a field but as mustard seed is so fertile, it could be hard to control it and the risk was that it would overwhelm the whole field and mix with other crops, so making the field and the harvest unclean.

The message of the kingdom of God as a mustard seed sown in a field or a garden was probably offensive to the religious Jews, but Jesus had a purpose to tell this parable. In the parable of the sower the seed is the message about the kingdom and the ground is the heart of man (Matt 13:19). Paul says 'you are God's field' and 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.' (1 Cor 3:9, 6). In the previous chapter, Paul writes that he came to Corinth with the 'testimony of God...Jesus Christ and Him crucified' (1 Cor 2:1-2). Paul came and preached the gospel of the kingdom, which is the story of Jesus. He planted the seed in their hearts and Apollo watered it; but once the seed of the gospel was sown, it was God who was responsible for the growth. I think Jesus in this parable is explaining that the message of the kingdom of God can be offensive and hard to understand, but once it has been sown, it germinates quickly and is impossible for man to control, it will grow and affect everything.

The greatest herb becomes a tree...

¹⁵ Pliny, *Natural History* cited in Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 380.

¹⁶ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 381-382.

Mustard grows into a large plant, six to a maximum of fifteen feet high, but no one today would call it a tree, yet that is what Matthew is saying.¹⁷ Mark is not writing about a tree but emphasises that it becomes 'greater than all herbs' (Mark 4:32).¹⁸ So the least of seeds grows greater than the herbs and becomes a tree according to Matthew. Chrysostom sees the parallels with the parable of the sower and the wheat and the tares, where only a quarter of the crops is saved but is then damaged by the tares. He believes that Jesus is telling this parable to remove fear and encourage the disciples; even if they are the least and weakest, the great power that is within them will take the kingdom to the ends of the earth.¹⁹

...where birds make nests and find shadow and rest.

The final lines of the parable could be pointing back to the OT where trees and birds symbolise kingdoms or empires and their subjects (Judg 9:7-15).²⁰ In Ezekiel 31 the tree is Pharaoh and in Daniel 4 it is Nebuchadnezzar. Both kings were enemies of Israel who stood proud as tall trees and, because of that, God brought them down. This fulfills the prophecy earlier in Ezekiel where God said that he would bring down 'the high and exalt the low tree'. The low tree is a twig from a high cedar that God will plant 'on a high and prominent mountain'; it will grow and bear fruit and become a dwelling place that gives shade for 'birds of every sort' (Ezek 17:22-24). This is a metaphor: cedars do not bear fruit; it is referring to a divine tree planted by God on his mountain and it is probably a Messianic prophecy.²¹ In Jewish tradition, the birds are regarded as an eschatological image of the Gentiles who will worship the God of Israel in the end times.²² The OT scriptures are not quoted in any version of the parable but the vocabulary is similar, and I believe Jesus is pointing back to this prophecy when he tells this parable, even though a small mustard shrub is nothing compared to a high cedar.²³ The kingdom of God will be great and even the Gentiles will be dwellers in it.

¹⁷ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: a commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), 395.

¹⁸ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 37.

¹⁹ Chrysostom, "New Advent," *Homily 46 on Matthew*, u.d., <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200146.htm>.

²⁰ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 37.

²¹ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 383-385.

²² Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 396.

²³ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 285.

Application

Even if the beginning of the kingdom was small and seemed to be insignificant in the healing and deliverance ministry of Jesus, the outcome will be great. The kingdom of God will ultimately reach the ends of the earth because the Gospel in itself has the capacity to grow, infiltrate and overtake.

The seed is the gospel of the kingdom, that is the story about Jesus or Jesus himself as *autobasileia*. The oil from the seed could be a picture of the Holy Spirit who has a distinctive and wonderful taste. When the Spirit of the Lord is upon us and anoints us, we are given the authority and power to be witnesses, to heal the sick and to cast out demons.

The field is our hearts and when we hear the gospel with an open heart and understand it, it will germinate at once and God will transform us from hearers to fields or gardens where the kingdom grows high and visible and gives fruits 'some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty' by the work of the Holy Spirit inside of us (Matt 13:18, 23 and Gal 5:21-22).

A seed has to be sown, and we are the ones called to plant the gospel in people's hearts. Jesus states that 'forceful people are taking hold of' the kingdom (Matt 11:12). Anointed with the Holy Spirit and sent out by Jesus, we have all that we need to fulfil this mission today. All we need is to take courage, put our faith in Jesus, and go out to plant. We do not need to be afraid, even if our message is offensive; Jesus, who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, the *autobasilea* himself is with us (Matt 28:18-20).²⁴

Conclusion

Jesus came to establish a kingdom that was going to impact, not only Israel, but all kingdoms of this world. The parable of the mustard seed is about extensive growth, Jesus describes a kingdom that initially seems quite insignificant but grows beyond expectation into greatness, but that is not all. I think the mustard seed was chosen on purpose; as a metaphor, it contains a lot of hidden truths about God's kingdom. In the seed, there is unexpected power to germinate and to defeat the enemy, and in the end, it will grow into to a tree where the birds can make nests. This

²⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 14.7* cited in McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 100.

eschatological meaning reveals the coming expansion of the kingdom to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth. Jesus is telling this parable to encourage the disciples, but even today it gives hope; even if the things we do for him are small, in due time they will grow and become a visible sign of the kingdom of God.

Bibliography

New Testament Greek Lexicon, BibleStudyTools, Basilea,
<<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/basileia.html>>.

Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Crysostom. "New Advent." *Homily 46 on Matthew* n.d..
<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200146.htm>>.

Dodd, Charles H. *The Parables of the Kingdom*. London: James Nisbet & Co., 1961.

Donahue, John R. *The Gospel in Parable*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Dunn, James D.G. *Jesus remembered; Christianity in the Making, Vol 1*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eernans Publishing Company, 2003.

Hultgren, Arland J. *The Parables of Jesus: a commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002.

McKnight, Scot. *The King Jesus Gospel; The original Good News Revisited*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011.

Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger. *Jesus of Nazareth*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007.

Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hear Then the Parable - A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Wright, Nicholas T. *Jesus and the victory of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996.