

The mustard seed

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[0:00] So Jesus continues in his discourse, he told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.

Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.

He told them still another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked through all the dough.

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet.

I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world. And we'll leave the reading there. Now in my evening readings recently, the Bible notes, commentary, Geneva Bible notes in fact, Pastor Tibbs is currently writing on Matthew, Pastor Tibbs at Upton Baptist Chester, which I found, I looked it up online to see where he was in Chester.

[1:23] So in fact, our friends Rob and Mavis were at Upton Baptist many, many, many years ago. So a little connection there. But Pastor Tibbs suggested that the parables in this section of Matthew could give the impression that the proclamation of the word of God could produce only a sparse yield.

In some ways, perhaps we think of that as the remnant of God's people that is often spoken of in the Bible, that God will retain.

That remnant, there will be a falling away at various times, and yet God has that remnant of his people to move forward. And we're seeing some of that as we move through the Old Testament, I'm sure.

And certainly it's our own experience of the gospel in our current day, particularly in a place like Brighton, which seems so hard and there seems so little fruit, as we might say.

And he had two points to make. One was about the seed and the other about the yeast. And the first seed, in fact the mustard seed, rather than wheat, and I read somewhere a while back about what actually the plant is, because we think of mustard, mustard and cress.

[2:45] You plant on blotting paper and you have it in examinitives and so on. But I'm sure that the mustard referred to here is probably something different, or in tropical, in the Mediterranean countries, maybe it grows into a bush.

But anyway, that's by the way. So the seed he put as extensive growth, extensive growth. Jesus assures his disciples in this parable of real growth, despite the hindrances.

Growth is intrinsic and apparent weakness. Growth is intrinsic and apparent weakness belies an unexpected strength. The apparent insignificance of God's word has built into it the potential for disproportionate development.

God has built into it the dynamic force of new spiritual life. And the worldwide spread of the gospel is very evident in our days, and that expansion is witnessed at a local as well as a global level.

I mean, in our situation, it is small, but in other countries, we think perhaps of what God has been doing in China over the years and so on.

[4:05] But the main thing we think about this is that the size of the seed is not the only feature mentioned here. The other factor is usefulness.

The illustration here in this passage is... The other factor is quite specific.

The resulting growth of the seed produces only a temporary habitation for birds. And that's what Jesus says. He says it becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches. It was intended to provide a rest and not a nest. They just came and perched, had a rest and so on. They do that in the tree outside the back of my bungalow.

There is somewhere else that is permanent. The bird has its home elsewhere, maybe in the eaves of a building, or maybe, as we read in the Old Testament, they find a nest within the temple even.

[5:19] For now, it makes provision for everyone without discrimination, Pastor Tibbs writes. And to me, that spoke of the free-off of the gospel.

We proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all and sundry, to, as we used to say in the Roman, to all face and none. And the kingdom of heaven in this world will give benefit to anyone who comes into it.

So that is available and we need to come as God draws us into the kingdom of God. God is at work in his world through his word.

And so I think we can see that around us. We know that. We've had people here being converted and so on. And we hear of other places where God is greatly blessing, in other places where it's small.

And yet this is only sort of this world's part of it, isn't it? The gospel, this is what we're looking forward to beyond. The gospel gives growth individually as well.

[6:27] And he comes on to that point in a matter of the yeast. And he's called it intensive growth. I don't think extensive and intensive are quite sort of linked in one sense.

And the common element he suggests in both these examples is the unseen life principle that resides in them. So when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, there is this new element that growth comes when it's added from outside, just like the yeast.

There is a sort of natural yeast and so on. But you add the yeast to the dough and it produces its effect.

It's added from outside. It's ineffective on its own. When put to the use that's intended for it, things change. And the emphasis here is not particularly on the alteration in size it produces, but the all-pervasive influence of the ingredient in the flour, the yeast within the flour.

And I was thinking about this, and we note, I think, particularly, that Jesus also used this illustration of the yeast in relation to the Pharisees and their wrong teaching of the law of God and how that sort of is insidious within the church, this leading away from the truth of God's word.

[7:56] We don't always notice it. You always have to be on the alert that you're not being drawn away because the particular teaching sounds good.

But is it firmly based in the word of God? I don't think I've made that very clear. It was very clear when I wrote it down. But, yeah, and I read it the other week.

But, yeah, so we have this sort of double aspect of this parable, the mustard seed and the provision that God has made for the birds.

They can flock and they can perch in it and so on. And in the sense we're thinking of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what Jesus came to do, we proclaim that to the world, and it is available to them in a sense.

But it needs the work of the Holy Spirit to give them understanding and to bring them, you know, to Christ through his word. And then the matter of the yeast is really the work that goes on within us as we look back over the years.

[9:03] We see how God has used his word, he's used servants of his, he's used preachers and the work of the Holy Spirit within us to move on in the Christian faith.

And it's the inner development that produces an external transformation, and that's certainly something many Christians have discovered when Christ has come into their lives.

There are changes. Some of us have been brought up in a Christian home, perhaps those changes aren't so dramatic. But nevertheless, there should be a change day by day, week by week.

The kingdom of heaven is not only spreading broadly, in a sense, and we perhaps deplore the fact that it's not as spreading as we might wish, as it has done in the past in times of revival, but it also has a profound effect on the communities it touches.

There is a quiet energy at work under God's direction. So we have this aspect, as it were, of the mustard seed and also the yeast, and that process that goes on in our lives day by day, week by week, year by year.

[10:24] And so this life principle must exercise individual influence before it can have a communal influence. People come to Christ, they live differently, they speak differently, and that has its effect upon the community.

Maybe that's what we need here in Brighton, as we think of the problems of the nighttime economy and the situation in the level and so on.

And, of course, that applies to many places around the world, in families and in workplaces and so on. Society has changed when God works through the people in it.

And sometimes God works in ways which are obvious, and sometimes he does not. Just because his ways may be unseen, it doesn't mean that he's inactive.

And it's something I think we need to bear in mind sometimes. The church, we seem to keep going, as it were, and we don't see much fruit, as we might call it, much reaction from within the community.

[11:32] We spread our leaflets, we talk to people at the book table and other outreach, and God doesn't always work in those ways. But God's ways are unseen.

One of the former chairmen of the Rowe Mission used to say, well, we're links in a chain, and we don't know what the result is. Do you know? And if you're the link that is broken, then the chain is broken.

And so we need to be aware, I think, that what our purpose in life is under God, and to work and to be obedient to him and his will and his purpose.

So God sometimes works in ways which are obvious, and sometimes he does not. And just because his ways may be unseen, it doesn't mean he's inactive.

We trust God to know what he's doing. I'm sure that the prophets found that. And, you know, maybe Samuel, what's going on? You know, they're turning away from, and they've chosen a king and so on.

[12:35] But Samuel trusted God and moved on in that way. And as we come to this part of the body, this bit of God's kingdom, this corner of God's vineyard, as was often said in past years, this little bit of Brighton, as we come as part of the body of Christ to celebrate the Lord's Supper, let us not despise the days of small things or be despondent, very easy to do that, isn't it?

Well, here we are, we're still, you know, how many? But God is at work. And he has added to us, not in vast numbers, but in the ones and twos, sometimes through conversion, sometimes people moving into the area and joining us.

But God is at work. With parts of his church greatly blessed, let's not despise that either. Let's rejoice with those who rejoice. And mourn with those who mourn.

Parts of his church greatly blessed in obvious or maybe extensive ways. But he has also worked in unseen ways with the hearts and minds of his people. I've got a tin of dried yeast sitting in my fridge, a little tin.

Not much use while it's sitting there. But every now and again when I've run out of bread, I get the flour out and the yeast out and three pounds of flour, a couple of tablespoons of yeast, a teaspoon of sugar, some warm water, and the mixer.

[14:09] And he can produce three loaves. First, of course, you mix the flour in with the, you know, it's just in the bottom, not even halfway up the bowl. You leave it for its first proving and it grows.

And you bash it and put it in the mixer again and put it into the loaf tins. And it only comes about halfway. And you wait depending on the heat, what the temperature is like, how quickly it rises. And eventually you get three nice fat loaves. So God is at work growing his church collectively and individually.

So there are those steps, as it were, in the flour, the water and the sugar and so on. But also I was thinking on the bus on the way over, well actually that dough is very sticky.

If it's a bit too sticky, it gets all over your fingers, all over the work surface and so on. But he needs to go in the oven and the oven is set at a fairly hot temperature to bake the loaves.

[15:10] And in some ways, some of our problems we have, the issues we face, a bit like that, you know, we need to be put through the heat of the day, the heat of the work to actually produce what God wants us to be.

Maybe that's a strange sort of analogy. But the final proof is not in the dough, but in the loaves.

That's the useful bit. The dough on its own, the yeast on its own, the flour on its own.

But bringing it all together and seeing and the time it takes and then in the oven and then the loaves. So let's encourage ourselves in this strange sort of way that God's work is going on.

It is free for anybody to come and hear. And some people come like the birds and they fly away. But others, God is at work and God is doing a change like the yeast.

You can't really see what's going on. You just see every now and again. You don't stop rising very much. Leave it another 20 minutes and so on. And so we do need to allow God to work in his time.

[16:28] Well, let's use these comments. First of all, in our thoughts and prayer as we turn to the Lord's Supper, particularly in terms of God's work through Jesus Christ.

And then a little later, hopefully, there'll be a time, a short time of open prayer when we come to the table after we've come to the table for particular matters.

But particularly thinking perhaps how God would work in our own lives and for the work of him and the church.