

The Mustard Seed

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Preacher: Alex Pett

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. So, Isabel, my daughter, set the tone for this morning, and she said, 'If you see me falling asleep, that's a sign that you're doing very badly in your tone.'

So I thought, you know, she has a spirit of encouragement. When I sat down to prepare for this morning, I don't know why, but I had this inkling, and I just put into artificial intelligence, so chat GPT, a creator preach on this parable of the mustard seed. I wondered what would come up, and as it did it so well, I'm going to use that. No, I'm not. And here it is, and it's interesting, because you look at it and think, that might be quite a nice prompt for a personal Bible study, but the thing that's missing from it is the Holy Spirit. And so this morning, we need God to speak to us, to reveal truth to us, to meet with us personally with what we need, and that miracle of how God can touch us personally in a talk that's for everybody. And so let's pray for that. Lord, we give you this morning, we give you this next few minutes, and ask that you would meet with us all.

You would speak to us, bring the encouragement, bring that healing, help that laying down of shame or pain. And we pray, Father, for an encounter and a revelation of you, your love, and your truth, as we just wait on you this morning. Amen. So I look at this first, and when Jesus says, what should we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable is used to describe it, I find it so interesting that Jesus is trying to sort of breathe life into the disciples' understanding of what the kingdom of God is, and if they need that, then so do we. And there's a story here, they've got a familiar story of small seeds becoming really large plants, incredible growth, something kind of powerful and supernatural in that. And I love it in the message version where it says, creates plants so big that eagles can sit in the branches of the tree, and that's a pretty big tree that can do that.

And so this metaphor of growth about the smallest thing becoming the greatest repeats in Scripture. And we see in Matthew, this seed is planted in a field. In Luke, it's in the garden here with markets in the ground. But the same story of supernatural growth and expansion. And if you stand back and look a bit further ahead of what Margaret read to us this morning, there's a narrative of the sowing of the seed, a seed that lands on hard ground and is eaten, the seed that is dried up or is blocked by wheat, or the seed that lands on fertile ground and then grows. And so this is really part of the same story here about our journey, our fruitfulness, our growth in God. So I see that commentators on these verses reference this growth of this plant to being really the story of Jesus, rather than being what much the

Jewish population wanted at that time, a king, a battle chief, to come in and rid them of the oppressive Romans and to be kingly and bring kingship and control and leadership to the population, that actually it is this surprising, different revelation of the Messiah as a relational encounter of the growth of the church over time, sort of quietly growing and expanding and not stopping. And so there's something very powerful here as we look further back to chapter, to verse 6. Jesus says, the growth of the kingdom is like a seed thrown into a field by a man who does not go to, who goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows, he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it without all his help. Then what came to mind for me when I read that was John 15 and Jesus talking about, I am the vine, my father is the gardener. As you remain in you, you will produce much fruit. And we can hear this story of organic growth when we're connected into God. And this being linked so strongly to our spiritual growth as well. I'm going to read two more verses in Jeremiah 17, 8. He would be like a tree planted by the water that sends its roots into the stream. It does not fear when heat comes. Its leaves are always green. It has no worry in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. And then in Psalm 92, the righteous will flourish like a palm tree. They'll grow like a cedar of Lebanon, planted in the house of the

[5 : 05] Lord. They'll flourish in the courts of our God. They'll still bear fruit in old age. They'll stay fresh and green. So you can hear this metaphor of growth, of health, of nourishment, and really of an ecosystem working.

So I read the verses. You'll notice this strong narrative coming out. And then went for a walk. And I went on poet's walk and stood on the hill at the end early in the morning. And I said, God, what do you want to say? And as I stood out looking across to Bristol, you could see quite stormy weather. You could see sunshine over Bristol. You could see clouds pouring over the hills. There's rain behind me, rain to the right, dark clouds over the Bristol Channel, the Bristol Channel racing along.

And I think God said, there's an ecosystem. And there are three things needed in that ecosystem. One is revelation. The second is nourishment. And the third is optimal frustration, which might sound a bit odd, but I'll try and make sense of that with you. As I reflected on that, that's what I want to share with you. What does it mean for us to be in a context in which we do grow, like this mustard seed into this great tree, how we stay flourishing and how we stay healthy? So let's start with revelation.

So I think that we need a revelation, an encounter with God that starts our relationship, an understanding of who God is, God's plans for our life, and the fact that we come alive when we experience the Holy Spirit meeting with us as we invite Jesus into our hearts.

I want to give you two verses. In Exodus 33, you see Moses in conversation with God saying, now show me your glory. I quite like his boldness there, demanding of God to reveal more of who God is. Now, you think he's already half up a mountain, talking with God in a long conversation, but a desire for more revelation, more revealing of who God is. And God responds, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, but you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. And so he makes Moses stand next to this rock and then passes by, and Moses glimpses something, has this revelation of who God is. And when he comes down from the mountain, people are frightened because he's glowing.

[7 : 38] They're so alive with a sense of the presence of God. And even in this passage we've just looked at, we can see Jesus creating revelation for the disciples. He says to them earlier on, when he was alone, the 12 and the others around him asked him about the parables and he told them, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside, everything is said in parables. And you can see him again revealing, breathing life, speaking in to help them understand, telling him who God is in relation to them. So my experience when I became a Christian was that when I made a decision and said, actually I want to give my life to you God, I ask that you would forgive me for my selfishness and you would fill me with your love. In that moment that came about because I'd had a revelation of who God is, that actually God's desire as our creator is to be in relationship, to be involved in our lives. That led me to that moment of standing there with some tears down my face and snot on it probably at the same time, just opening up before God and saying, actually, I want you in my life, Lord. And at the time I remember I was 18 and I think I had everything I needed in life. I had a mountain bike, a girlfriend, a job. I was quite fit. I had plans ahead of me. I was doing lots of exercise. But in that time I remember just noticing there's something missing. And as I searched I met Christians all over the place who were quite proactive and would talk to me and give me words or give me a bit to the Bible. I read the Bible a bit and then I started to have experiences of God in some meetings I went to. And this revelation of who God is led me to a point of giving my life to God. And this sense of revelation, this encounter, this moment of clarity, a moment of clarity, I think is so crucial to root us, to put us in the earth like that mustard seed so we can start to begin to take roots and flourish and grow. What I notice is when people are really struggling with a relationship with God, often that revelation is missing, that encounter, that clarity, that truth of who God is and God's love for us.

I remember when I walked away from God around 19, a year later, I sort of started to give up on God a bit and choose to not engage, to not pray and to make some other choices that weren't great. And as I did it, the revelation was still so strong. It's like falling out with someone who lives next door, but they're always next door. You can't really get away from them. So even though I was walking away doing my own thing, I could sense that the truth and reality of God was still there because of that initial revelation. So we need a revelation of who Jesus is to help us plant and begin that connection in deep roots. But also I think we need revelation as we go throughout our lives. Reminders, deeper understanding, fresh connection, fresh encounter. And I had one of those moments when I was ill in COVID, I was in hospital, and I'm conscious of a very sensitive period of time for some in the room, and I was frightened. I was being given more and more oxygen, just declining. And I was starting to think, will I actually come out of here? And the cleaner came into my room, and I noticed as he was cleaning, he was just singing worship songs. I thought they sounded like worship songs, very quietly.

So I said, I mean, it sounds like you're singing worship songs. He said, yeah, they are. And actually, as I walked past this room, I saw you, I felt prompted to come in. And I want to pray for you. So he did. And in that moment, for me, was a moment of revelation, in a moment of need, that my family couldn't visit. I was scared, but actually God reached out and met with me. A revelation of God's love, that we can't move, get anywhere away from the love of God.

So we need revelation, a profound one, that causes this initial encounter. It might be drip feed over time or a particular moment, and we need regular sense of reminding and deepening of the love of Jesus for us, and all the promise that brings. So why don't you just take a moment and pause?

And maybe you're someone who's thinking, right now, I could do with one of those moments of encounter. Or thinking, actually, I don't feel so rooted. I need to know more of who you're God.

[12 : 38] I need you revealing to me. If that's you, then open your hearts to God. Open your hearts to Lord. Lord, we ask that you would meet with anyone in here who is just seeking your love, your revelation, a fresh encounter, whether they are carrying a wrestle from illness, or grief, or pain, or just distance from you, Lord. In your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

I'm afraid that's only point one. You've got two more coming in front of this, so stick with it. The next one is nourishment. And... Sorry, bear with me.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus says, the seed sprouts and grows. The guy goes to bed, has no idea how this works. The seed grows. And so I think our nourishment really does come through our encounter with the Holy Spirit, through worship, through prayer, through scripture, through the Bible, through an understanding of God, and through community. Now, given that we're not here all day, you don't have to listen to me for that long. I'm going to touch on this briefly in just two buckets.

One bucket of how the Holy Spirit meets us through worship, through prayer. And then one about community, and what God might be saying to us about that. Now, in these verses, I want to read, there's such a strong story about the Holy Spirit in John 14, 26. But the helper, as Jesus is saying, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to you remembrance all that I've said to you. In verse 16, sorry, chapter 16 in John, nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is your advantage that I'm going away, for if I do not go away, the advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. John 20. And when he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit. It's clearly such a strong story from Jesus and all the writing in the Bible and the New Testament profoundly, that our nourishment, our growth comes from the Holy Spirit. And for our vision in Christchurch, we, as part of our refreshed vision, going forward is for a deeper encounter of the Holy Spirit together and individually to more profoundly know the presence and love of God in our lives.

And then building on that, some more verses, when we think about prayer and worship. Psalm 119, your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path. Colossians 3, 16, let the word of God dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing with one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And then Psalm 150, let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Such a strong narrative again of worship, of prayer and of coming together in that.

[15 : 57] And my experience is that when we are alive in worship, when there's a sense of prayer and connect to this, when there's a sense of giving space and encounter for the Holy Spirit, there's growth.

There's growth in individuals' lives. There's an extending of what we do here out into the community. And so a question I'd love us to consider is where's the aliveness in us? How are we doing in our relationship with God? How are we doing in prayer? How are we coming to worship with an open heart, with an expectation of the Spirit of God meeting with us? Just how are we doing?

It ebbs and flows. So let's take a moment and just really consider that. I want to talk to you about a story that really came to mind here. A sense of coming together, the Holy Spirit, Scripture and worship surfacing. I was in America at school for a year when I was just after 18 to 19, just become a Christian. And I had this strange thing that after I became a Christian, for a while, if someone was filled with the Holy Spirit, I could see it in their eyes.

Kind of sounds strange to me now. But at the time, it was really visible. And I remember arriving at this school in North Carolina. I'd just flown over, I'm bleary-eyed, picked up from the airport, driven to this school in the Appalachian Mountains, where I'm going to spend the next year.

And one of the first people to welcome me was the chaplain, Terence. Terence Olspar. Sorry about the accents. If you know Americans here, you can quote that. And as I met Terence, he shook my hand and welcomed me. I looked in his eyes and I thought, you'll feel the Holy Spirit.

[17 : 39] So another time when I met in one of his prayer groups, I just asked him quietly, are you filled with the Holy Spirit? He said, well, yes. Why would you ask? And we had a good conversation. But at some point, he said to me, look, I've noticed that in some of our prayer meetings, I hear you very quietly at times, though, praying in tongues. If you're not familiar, tongues is a prayer language, which when you meet with the Holy Spirit can be given to you, a way of you connecting with God deeper than just your sort of conscious processing of what prayer shall I make. It's a prayer language. I said, yes, that's something that happened to me after I became a Christian. I got prayed for and got this prayer language. So yes, I do pray in tongues.

He said, well, I've always really wanted to have the gift of tongues. I wonder whether you'd come and pray with me. He said, I'd be happy to. So we met one evening to have a conversation, cup of tea and a prayer. Terrible tea in America, but never mind. So he said, well, how do we do this?

I'm thinking, well, you're the chaplain. He said, well, when I got prayed for, this is how we did it. The person said, well, won't you ask God? I'll ask God on your behalf. I'll pray in tongues over you.

And then you just wait and allow the Holy Spirit to give you a language. Don't try and force it. It'll come. So why don't we do that? He said, sounds great. And so that's what we did. And as we prayed, the sense of the presence of God just dropped on us like a blanket around us. It's like that sense of when you're feeling very in love with someone, but so much more profound and deeper. So the sense of presence of God was just on us as I then prayed in tongues and waited for him to give it a go.

And he stopped me after a while and said, look, I can really sense the presence of God with us, Alex. He said, but do you speak Greek? And I said, well, no. He said, well, you're speaking Greek.

[19 : 28] You're saying, thank you, God, for Jesus. Thank you for your love. Thank you for your presence. You're just repeating that over and over again. He said, the issue is I speak 11 languages.

And if I speak now, I feel I'm just going to speak in one of the languages that I already have. And so what I know is I can sense the presence of God. And as I can interpret what you're saying, I know this is a gift from God. I know tongues is something from God. And so I feel relaxed that when God wants me to have this, he'll give it to me. And that's okay. So I'm good for now. Thanks very much.

But that sense of we're coming together, there's a sense of worship. We're praying in the presence of the Holy Spirit. And then there's a revelation of who God is, but a nourishment, an encouragement of feeding of his faith and mind, and it grows.

I recently heard a church leader, Pete Hughes, who leads KXC Church in London. They have a number of churches together. And he was speaking at a wildfires conference. And he did a really powerful talk.

And there's one moment of it that really came to mind, as I was thinking about this morning, for us to reflect on. He talked about this notion of never coming to the altar empty.

[20 : 48] Now, we have an altar somewhere back there, but we don't need an altar because Jesus was that final sacrifice that broke the power of sin and death and enables us to connect with God directly.

He talked about when you see altars, particularly in Asian countries, you know, people don't rock them empty. They have a gift. They have a garland, or they have some food or something to leave. So there's a principle here about never coming to a gathering together, whether that's a home group or a meeting like this or Wednesday morning communion with empty hands. And he talked about three things. Coming with our pain, that actually we come before God real, as we are, not a mask, because this is the very place to bring it before God when there are wrestles, pains, challenges, or hurts. Coming with our repentance, the revelation where we're realising actually I'm making wrong choices here, that we bring that before God as well. And that we come to the altar, we come before God together with worship in our hearts. So just consider for you what it is that you recognise you need for your nourishment. Is it an encounter in worship? Is it in your prayer life? Is it meeting with the Holy

Spirit in a new way? To Lord, for those who are seeking you, Holy Spirit, meeting with you, we pray for that encounter to come about. For Lord, those who are feeling like the prayer aren't answered and it feels like it's blank, I pray, Lord, that you would tear down the wall that feels like it's there and meet with them and bring answers to those prayers. For those, Lords, where worship feels stuck and it's hard to raise a sense of connection to you, we ask, Holy Spirit, you would meet with them the moment they stand faithfully before you and they would encounter the joy of worshipping you and knowing your love. In your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Okay, third section. You still with me? Okay. Is Isabel awake? Is Isabel awake? She's awake? I think so. Good. Got the thumbs up.

When I was younger, I was part of the Catholic Church and so I grew up where the priests did like 10, 12 minute sermons. I love that. Short and sharp. I'm breaking one of my rules. I'm going a little bit longer here. So the third bucket that I felt was so, or actually this is still the second bucket, isn't it? Sorry, second bucket, is community. The sense of how important community is for our nourishment and growth. And in 1 Corinthians 12, there's one body but it has many parts. But all its many parts make up one body. It is the same with Christ. We're all baptised by one Holy Spirit and so it's all formed into one body. The eye can't say to the hand, I don't need you. The head can't say to the feet, I don't need you. In fact, it's just the opposite. In that way, the parts of the body will not take sides. All of them who take care of one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part shares in its joy. You are the body of Christ.

[24 : 12] Each one of you is a part of it. When I look at Christ Church, when I look at us, I see the parts of the body and I see some real fruitfulness. I see Rita and Ken leading Alpha with passion and people coming to know Jesus. I see Russ and colleagues leading Living Life to the Full and helping people find breakthroughs and being drawn into our community. I see Jill and Kate with the Chatty Cafe, really creating a sense of connection and relationship in a community for those who particularly feel it's lacking. I see Marion and others on the Wednesday communion. Helen with the team and Refresh. The TLG coaches investing in the lives of young people in schools. The home group leaders and their groups and there are many others. There's a sense of the different parts of the body at work, bringing Jesus to others. And in that, that sense of we are the hands and the feet and the voice of Jesus around us. And it's not enough. It's rich. It's meaningful. It's creating breakthrough in people's lives. And God, I think, is asking us to be even more fruitful than that.

I remember about 10 years ago, I was fairly bored with church life. I felt like I'd been going to church for 45 years and sort of very meaningfully since I was a Christian for 35 years. And I just felt a bit bored. And I was chatting to a friend, Libby, who's a vicar. And as she heard this, she said, the issue isn't the church, it's you, very encouragingly. She said, you're not engaging properly.

She said, don't be waiting for some sense of what your particular core or unique contribution is right now. Your responsibility as a member of your church is like being in a family.

We have a family gathering this afternoon. It's why I'm wearing a shirt rather than a t-shirt today. And when we go there, we won't sit around and expect others to wait on us and do the clearing up, the 17 of us. No, we'll get up and we'll all muck in. In the same way, there isn't a sense of, are you calling me to volunteer in this way with the welcome or with hosting or this? No, but a sense of this is family responsibility to muck in and be a contribution, to be the body at work in our everyday work as a church family. And yes, there are elements where you might have a particular calling or gifting where God is saying now, yes, step into this. Fantastic. And we need to be doing that as well. So again, as we think about our vision as a church, think about our contribution in this community, think about outworking our calling. As part of that, I encourage you, consider actually what is your way of giving in your time? What team could you be a part of? Where can you bring encouragement to others? Where can you be praying? Third, optimal frustration. It might seem like a slightly strange concept, but it really came to me clearly as I was praying for this. The growth only really occurs when there's a level of challenge and pressure. And in my work, we look a lot at developmental stages in childhood and how for children, there's an optimal frustration they need from naught to six to grow really healthily. Not enough challenge, they don't grow right psychological robustness. Too much challenge, it can limit that robustness. Into adulthood as well, that there are these developmental stages for us. And that as we press into challenges, as we face new situations, as we learn, as we press in, that actually we grow and develop. If any of you are trying to work on your fitness, you'll know that when you stop, you start to atrophy and your muscles become soft and you notice how weak you are. And I tried to pick something up at home and I realised I was becoming weak because there's a lack of challenge, a lack of appropriate pressure, of optimal frustration for my muscles to actually keep the strength. And as you read in scripture and the Bible, there's an ongoing story of challenge, of invitation to press in, of a need for growth, a need for participation.

And so you might be in a time where you're feeling a particular level of challenge. I think a key question is, God, is this something to be praying against? Is this attack in some way in my life?

[28 : 57] Or actually, is this something you're simply wanting me to engage and press in and learn from? When I work with leaders, which is my everyday work, I never work with senior leaders who are effective, who haven't been through challenge and face failure, because that is part of that growing and strengthening and evolving. In the same way, we will face all sorts of challenges that we grow in our faith and our learning and our new understanding of Jesus. And in that, that's where we need each other, the encouragement, the insight, the wisdom, and we need the Holy Spirit to nudge us and help us as well.

So a parable of growth, a narrative of growth throughout the Bible, and that needs revelation of Jesus. It needs nourishment, and also it needs a level of challenge and a wrestle for that growth to really be truly fruitful.

Well, Lord, we give you these words. Lord, remove anything that isn't from you. Lord, stir our hearts where you're particularly prompting us to respond, to press in deeper with you, Holy Spirit, to press in to our community, to attend to our roots and what needs changing so we might be more nourished and flourish more greatly. In your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.