

Small beginning, Big finish

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[0 : 00] We're going to have our Bible reading this morning. It is from Matthew 13, starting at chapter 31.

So Matthew 13, starting at chapter 31. He put another parable before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened.

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables. Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet.

[1 : 05] I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world. Good morning.

My name is Simon. I'm just one of the regular attenders here, but I will be bringing us our message today. Isn't that fun? Special welcome to you if you're visiting from Sydney or Tamworth or somewhere else in between.

But please open your Bibles with me to Matthew chapter 13. We just pray before we kick in.

Gracious Father, thank you for your words so clearly spelt out to us. As I go through this message, please give me your words to speak and your word to permeate the hearts of all who hear, whether here or at home or listening later.

In Jesus' name, amen. So as we've just heard through Marty, we're in the midst of a series of talks working through the parables of Jesus as we can for us in the book of Matthew.

[2 : 22] Adam beautifully put it last week. Each of these parables shows us a different aspect of the kingdom of God. Like a beautiful gem, we see the beauty of the kingdom, but as we turn the gem, we discover new and different aspects.

When we can put all of these different views together, we can get a deeper understanding of the whole. And to use a worldly parable, three blind men come across an elephant. The first man finds a leg and includes, it's a tree.

The second man bumps into the trunk and says, it's a snake. The third man feels the tail and goes, it's a broom. So when we look at a single aspect of something, we learn about that one aspect, but it's when we put all the parts together to make the whole that we discover something much greater than we could have conceived.

Now, while this worldly parable can often be used to show how no one religion has all the answers, I think it is better served to help us understand the way these parables that we're working through tell us about the kingdom of God.

So why does Jesus talk in parables? So Jesus explains to his disciples that he teaches in parables to reveal the kingdom of heaven to those who are ordained to hear.

[3 : 40] Jesus uses the knowledge of his audience to teach about the kingdom of heaven. He uses everyday scenarios and images. Now, these images are not overtly religious and as such do not pose a threat to the world.

As Eugene Peterson states, the listeners walked away perplexed, wondering what the parables meant, the stories lodged in their imaginations. See, the use of simple language makes the teaching accessible to everyone, but will also be easily discounted as worthless by those who are looking for the majesty and power of a kingdom.

The use of everyday images also allows daily tasks to remind us of the kingdom of heaven and keep his teachings at the forefront of our minds. Every time we see a field of grain, we can be

reminded of the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds.

Every time we see or smell a fresh batch of bread, we can be reminded of the parable of the leaven. When we see birds perching a tree, we can be reminded of the parable of the mustard seed.

But why these parables? Why are we talking about the mustard seed in the tree? And why are we talking about the leaven today? So as we heard last week, all the parables are distinctly different, but they're all linked.

[5 : 03] The parable of the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed and the leaven, they all contain an inherent aspect of growth. These parables answer a question of growth.

A couple of weeks ago, Matt asked us the question, do we feel like the gospel is failing in Australia? It's an interesting question. And the way we answer the question would depend entirely on our perspective.

Our definition of success will shape how we can answer. If we take the world's perspective, we might look to the physical growth of the church, bums on seats, numbers through the door, as a measure of the success of the gospel.

Now, in an article published by the ABC on Monday, just go on, Professor Andrew Singleton of Deakin University states that in Australia, Pentecostals demonstrate a high level of religious commitment and practice, telling the Radio National Programme, they are the number one in terms of attendance and bums on seats.

If you're Pentecostal, you're pretty much guaranteed to go to church each week. And while the congregations of other Christian denominations are in free fall, Pentecostal membership has increased in line with population growth since the 1980s.

[6 : 21] So, by the worldly measure, the only truly growing form of Christianity in Australia is Pentecostalism. And growth there is 35% from immigration.

Is that how we measure growth of the church? Last week, Adam encouraged us to live our lives in light of the harvest, not in light of the crop in the field. As the weeds and the wheat grow, they're almost indistinguishable.

It's only when the fruit, the seed of each plant develops, that we can see what is wheat and what is weed. So, how do we feel when we are called by God to place all our hope, all our identity, all our eternal self in the smallest of the seeds?

It is easy to feel that Christianity is losing social status and influence in Western cultures. Our own personal walk with God in knowledge and love can feel like one step forward, two steps back.

It's just so hard to be consistent. But as we engage in kingdom work through little conversations with other believers, with private, unknown, unapplauded prayers and giving to missionaries, the little moments of teaching and correcting our children to see life from a Christian perspective, these can all seem insignificant compared to the comfort and prosperity and sense him important that the world puts value on.

[7 : 49] But by revealing aspects of the kingdom through the parables, Jesus gives us a true perspective of things. Jesus is using the knowledge that we have to reveal the kingdom to us.

So let's open up to verse 34. All these things Jesus said to the crowd in parables. Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.

Now, I think I need to clarify at this point that it's clear as we read through the various gospels that Jesus does not talk exclusively in riddles when talking to the crowd.

There is not an aspect of Yoda where every item is aristocrat. Hmm, found someone, yes. No, Jesus' words are not a listing of proverbs. This statement is telling us that parables are an integral part of Jesus' teaching and he did not teach the crowds anything without using parables as part of his teaching.

Moving on to 35. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet. I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.

[9 : 03] So how is Jesus' teaching in parables fulfilling the words of the prophet? And which prophet's words are he fulfilling? So these lines here in verse 35 are quoted from Psalm 78, which is a psalm written by Asaph.

Throughout Psalm 78, Asaph recounts the history of Israel from the promise to Jacob, which affirmed the promise to Abraham, through all of Israel's sojournings in the wilderness, all of Israel's complaints in the wilderness, the punishment made it against Egypt, and all the aspects of the rebellion of God's people.

Yet Asaph shows us that through all this, God is steadfast. Asaph recounts the history of Israel not from the perspective of the glory of the kingdom, rather from the perspective of the righteous act of God in redemption.

So this is what Matthew, in compiling his gospel, believes that Jesus is doing, taking the known facts and reshaping them to give us information that was previously unknown or unconsidered. Now the most obvious example for this is during the Sermon on the Mount we looked at around this time last year. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus teaches the true meaning behind the Jewish law. In verses 21, 27, 31, 33 of chapter 5, he uses the phrase, you have heard it said, or something along these lines.

[10:27] When there Jesus enters into a teaching on the law as it is stated, and then the motives of the heart that are behind each of these laws. These teachings guide us to understanding that the kingdom of heaven is not ruled by law, not accessed through physical obedience, but rather by a changing of attitude within our hearts based on the original plan that God has for us.

The parables teach us aspects of heaven that have always been there, but not understood in their nature prior to Jesus shaping them in this way. Don Carson, in his commentary on this passage, describes it well with, Jesus is the royal king and son of David foreseen in scripture, but also the stricken shepherd, equally foreseen in scripture.

Who clearly foresaw that both of these streams would merge into one person? Are we open to having our preconceptions challenged and changed by Jesus?

Are we open to learning new things about God and his kingdom as our hearts are shaped by the gospel? Are we willing to give up our expectations and let Jesus guide us on the path of life?

With a slight understanding of what Jesus is doing with these parables, let's look now at how Jesus challenges the understanding and expectations of his audience then and now with these words.

[11:54] Jesus teaches us that his kingdom is for all nations and it is guaranteed to grow. Going back up to verse 31, Jesus put another parable before them saying, the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds. When it is grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Before we get lost in the amazing imagery and history that's wrapped up in this simple story, let's have a look at some more obvious oddities.

Firstly, the mustard seed. While we clearly know that a mustard seed is not literally the smallest of all seeds, we can appreciate that the point Jesus makes. This is not the only time that a mustard seed is used to represent something almost insignificantly small.

In Matthew chapter 17, Jesus uses the mustard seed as an example of the tiniest amount of true faith that has the power to move mountains. So the mustard seed is used as a stereotype for the picture of insignificance.

[13:09] Secondly, the mustard tree. Now most commentators that I read and most farmers I'm sure would agree that calling a mustard plant a tree is a bit of a stretch.

Everyone agrees that the mustard plant can grow up to three metres high, but it is more commonly referred to as a bush, as most mustard varieties are a small shrub. So why does Jesus describe it as a tree?

As we look back at some scripture reflections that this story evokes, we can begin to understand. If we look at the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel, the mighty trees that provide shelter to all the nations are compared to the mighty cedars of Lebanon.

The cedar is a beautiful tree. It's tall, strong, beautiful to behold. So the cedar is an excellent metaphor for a kingdom. The seeds of a cedar, while not as small as a mustard seed, aren't exactly the biggest seeds out there either.

Acorns are bigger. Peaches are bigger. Plums are bigger. So why a mustard tree? It's even when assuring us that the kingdom will grow, Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God is not what we expect it to be.

[14:25] From a worldly comparison, the kingdom of God might look weak or pathetic. As a mustard tree, we compare to a mighty cedar. The imagery of the parable draws us away from the earthly majesty of our kingdoms and focuses our hearts on the assured growth to the mature conclusion.

The mature conclusion that the kingdom of God is growing towards is a place of rest for all nations. Jesus is pushing his predominantly Jewish audience to lift their view of the kingdom up from their expectations of a restoration of the kingdom of David, the worldly kingdom of Israel.

The promise to Abraham of a blessing to all nations is coming to fruition. The fullness of God's kingdom is being revealed and it is bigger than Israel, just as it was always intended.

Our third oddity, a mustard seed sown in a field. Just as a lot of people agree that calling a mustard bush a tree is odd, planting it in a field is also out of place.

Jesus himself in this parable recognises that mustard is a garden plant. So if we follow Eugene Peterson's line of thought that these stories were used for teaching as they lodged in our brains, the idea of a garden plant growing in a field is just ludicrous enough that we'll keep calling it for a good laugh.

[15:51] Remember that time Jesus planted the herb out in the fields with all the wheat? What an idiot. But the story of the kingdom remains with us and our minds turn it over and over every time we think on it.

God's word is work in our hearts, even as we're laughing at the ridiculousness of that image. So two sentences, three anomalies.

The audience back then as well as now, we all can't help wondering, what is Jesus trying to say?

So the image of the birds coming and making nests in the branches of the tree reflects the imagery of Ezekiel chapter 31.

Here the prophet is speaking to Pharaoh with the words of God. The prophecy speaks of the might and majesty of the Assyrian kingdom, famous for decimating the northern tribes of Israel.

He reflects it as a cedar in Lebanon. In verse 6 of Ezekiel chapter 31, he recounts, all the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs.

[16:58] Under its branches, all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young. Under its shadow lived all great nations. There is also a similar reflection of this in Daniel chapter 4 when Daniel is talking to Nebuchadnezzar.

The description of a tree that provides nesting for all the birds of the air or heavens is a kingdom, an empire that is mighty, a kingdom that provides for all the needs of those who dwell within.

So the image of a mustard seed, the stereotype of insignificance, growing into a mighty kingdom, providing benefits for all who come to rest in its shade. Jesus' words show us the organic unity of the small beginning and the mature conclusion.

The empires spoken of in Ezekiel and Daniel were all erased. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, gone. Yet God's kingdom endures forever.

The mighty seed have been chopped down but the mustard tree will last forever. That small, insignificant seed will grow into a mighty kingdom, will endure.

[18:18] So when we see the value in which the world holds God's kingdom, are we reminded of the insignificance of the mustard seed? The disciples hearing this message would have been, well, let's get it.

At this point, they probably didn't get it but very shortly, in the next few years, they'll grasp the full power of this message. As they embark on the world-shaping journey of evangelism, these words would have been a great comfort.

In the years following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the disciples committed their lives to preaching the kingdom of God to all who would hear. From the small beginning of 12 men, the church grew.

We can look through Acts and see that there are many verses where it states many believed.

Chapter 4, verse 4. Chapter 9, verse 42. Chapter 13, verse 48.

Chapter 17, verse 12. Chapter 8, verse 8. Chapter 21, verse 20. Many believed. In those early years, the church grew from 12 to tens of thousands.

[19:28] There's more seed, mighty tree. Even with persecution, like from Saul, the church continued to grow in numbers.

And even Saul himself had the word hidden from his heart and after his revelation on the road, became part, an integral part, of the spread and growth of the kingdom. But, even as the numbers of Christians grew, it was not until a Christian became the emperor of Rome that the church gained earthly authority to exist.

In the year 313, Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, granting to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred. and the Catholic Church was born. So nearly 300 years of growth in numbers, crossing physical and cultural boundaries before the church became accepted by the world.

So it begs the question, how do we consider the growth of the church? Do we merely think of the breadth of growth, the numbers, people coming through the door and the bums on seats?

[20 : 37] Is the church growing successfully if we run out of seats and run out of car parks and we need to keep expanding? We've touched on the message of the Sermon on the Mount from chapter 5 of Matthew where Jesus reveals that the kingdom was a matter of reorientation of a person's heart.

Now this concept is so at odds with society's drive for confident success that the world is unable to see the growth of the kingdom or even consider that a decline in numbers in the church may in fact be the church growing in deeper love and understanding through refining of the people who are turning up every week.

What do the apostles consider to be growth? In Ephesians chapter 4 verses 15 and 16 Paul talks of growing up in every way into him who is the head into Christ so that when each part is working properly it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

In Philippians chapter 1 verse 9 and 10 Paul prays that their love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment. Or in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 3 Paul gives thanks to God for their faith growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Or Peter the final words of 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 18 Amen. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.

[22 : 18] Amen. In all these prayers of growth it is not about numbers. The growth of the saints and the growth of the church is measured in depth of understanding and knowledge.

Growth is shown by increasing love for one another so that the church builds itself up. As we grow in faith we grow in love.

As we grow in love the church is lifted and God is glorified. With the seed of the kingdom planted in us God guarantees that we will grow and the sign of growth is increased love.

So how are we growing? How are we growing individually? How are we growing as a church?

Christianity has spread a long way from its humble beginnings.

The church has crossed political, cultural, physical barriers to extend over almost all the surface of the earth and it continues to spread. How can we help grow the kingdom in the world?

[23 : 25] Not just in bringing numbers in but helping them to grow in knowledge and discernment. Helping them to abound more and more in love one for another.

How do we help the body build itself up in love? What are the aspects of our kingdom lives that we feel are insignificant? Perhaps we think it's insignificant to give money to support that missionary.

No one knows we do it. We don't gain any glory for it. maybe it's insignificant to provide a meal to that person in need. It's just a meal I was already cooking one little bit extra it's easy.

Or maybe you think it's insignificant to cross age or cultural boundaries to have conversations with other members of our church. All of these things which seem insignificant to the world are building each other up in love.

Does it seem to you that the kingdom shines brighter to us when you see people from all backgrounds all cultures affected the same way of the same words to be called to the same kingdom home?

[24 : 42] You see God is doing his work. It's hidden but it's powerful and it permeates all aspects of life. Let's go now to verse 33 of Matthew chapter 13 no longer Ezekiel.

He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a leaven that a woman hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened. As Marty described with the kids talk, that small batch of yeast has a huge effect on the whole dough.

Now typically biblically we associate yeast with the pervasiveness of sin, the way that one small thing gets in and invades our whole lives. But it's not exclusively used to represent evil or bad or sin in the Bible.

Leavened bread itself is specifically called for in the sacrifice of peace offerings and in the Feast of Weeks, both from Leviticus. Leavened is not universally bad in the Bible.

There is the concept that Israel left Egypt without leaven as symbolic of them leaving behind all ties to the slave nation and would make roots as a new nation, right down to the intrinsic constituents of their bread.

[26 : 00] I had to dig a little deeper in this to understand the difference between yeast like Marty showed us with the kids and that fine powder and what a leaven would have been to the original listeners. Now at that day yeast leaven it's all the same thing.

We see a physical difference because we have new technology and through different processes through the 1600s we discovered yeast as a dried yeast extract. But leaven in this parable refers to something akin to a sourdough starter where you have the flour and the water catching natural yeast extracts in the atmosphere mixing probiotics.

I think that helps us to understand if we understand what leaven was in that context it opens us a deeper understanding of the kingdom. Leaven's not something we can simply take from a packet like Marty did.

We can't just take this little thing and sprinkle it in and it will rise. Leaven is something that came before it was established before our time that is cultivated and grows and can be used over and over again long after we're gone.

Leaven is kept by the bread maker of each family in Jesus' parable times and a portion is added to each batch of dough to make it rise. So as Christians, as believers, as saints, we need to let the word of God permeate throughout entire lives.

[27 : 34] Just as leaven affects the entire batch of dough, so should the word of God affect all aspects of life, shaping our identity as members of God's kingdom. The growth that we have looked at in terms of love, understanding, knowledge, discernment, these are the signs of the kingdom permeating our lives.

I can name four main aspects of my life, work, family, church, and rugby. I name them as the four main aspects because that's the basic divisions of time in my week.

work. And it's easy for us to compartmentalise the different aspects of our lives. Work doesn't spill into family. Rugby doesn't spill into work or family, and work and family don't spill into rugby. Everything neatly in its little box. Church really doesn't spill into any of them. We find it easy to live as members of the kingdom when surrounded by other members of the kingdom, but much harder when surrounded by the things of this world.

But that's not what the kingdom of God is like. When I have the word of God in my heart, it will permeate all aspects of my life. It will dissolve my autonomy of self and restore the sovereignty of God.

[28 : 54] God spills into my family, into my work, and even into my rugby. As the word of God permeates into my life, the kingdom will overflow into everything that I do.

it's okay that Christianity is not the focus or front of mind of the world. God's kingdom will permeate the whole world and be known and acknowledged by all.

God's kingdom is different to the world. It has different values. We cannot rate them the same way. And God will make sure that the values of the kingdom will last longer than any worldly focus.

God's kingdom is different to us. God's perspective of the kingdom is different to ours.

We need to fill our hearts with his word. Let it permeate to all areas of our lives to gain some level of understanding and appreciation for the perspective that God has.

[29 : 57] The kingdom today feels small and insignificant. All that it's been reduced by the world in physical size or social importance. But with those with eyes to see and ears to hear, God is still growing his kingdom.

So we need to live now but in respect of the not yet. We've seen that the tree will grow. We've seen that the bread will rise.

Will you? We feel that tension that we're encouraged by seeing and feeling the growth of the kingdom and the way that the world treats it as something insignificant.

So even though the growth of the kingdom is guaranteed by God, we are still living in the mustard seed of the kingdom. It is only at the end that the mature conclusion of the kingdom be displayed for all of creation to see.

As in the parable of the weeds, it is at the harvest that the true members of the kingdom will be revealed. So how do we live now in respect to that future time?

[31 : 16] If we measure God's idea of growth properly as internal character change, people of all cultures coming to nest in Jesus, then the worldly measures of success make it look weak and pathetic.

But we will see the glory of God that is building and growing, God's word permeating all of a person and all cultures of the world. If we believe this, we will embrace being seen as insignificant in the eyes of the world and being part of Jesus' mission in seemingly insignificant ways.

So as we go into this week, how will you feel when we are called by God to place all our hope, all our identity, and all our eternal self in the smallest of the seeds?

, from the same looked at his other weaknesses, and all through the number of wonders.