

In Growth

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[0 : 0 0] And today's first reading is from Psalm 78, which can be found on page 586 of the Church Bibles. That's Psalm 78 on page 586, and we'll be reading verses 1 to 8.

So that's Psalm 78 on page 586. Give ear, O my people, to my teaching. Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, and the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children.

So that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. And that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

[1 : 3 0] The second reading is from Matthew chapter 13, reading from verses 31 to 35, and this can be found on page 987 of the church Bibles.

So Matthew chapter 13, beginning at verse 31. He put another parable before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that the 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 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.

[2 : 4 6] This is God's word. Let's pray as we begin.

Thank you, Father, for your word and for these parables that you've given us to help understand your kingdom. And I pray that you would give us open ears to hear and eyes to see clearly the encouragement from these parables.

Amen. Amen. So do you all remember filling in the 2021 census just two years ago? Now, for those of us who are Christians here today, we would have, in the religion bit of the census, ticked the box that says Christian on it.

Now, if you were to have a guess at the number of people, or sorry, the percentage of people in this country who also ticked that box that identifies themselves as a Christian, what would your guess be?

And if you're thinking 71.7%, that is too high. Now, that was the percentage of people who identified as a Christian in the 2001 census, just 20 years ago.

[4 : 02] And if you're thinking 59.3%, that is still too high. That was the percentage in the 2011 census. No. No. In the 2021 census, the percentage of people who identified as a Christian was 46.2%.

And in London, where people of different faiths are the most diverse in this country, we would not be surprised to know that the percentage of Christians is even lower here.

It is 40.6%. Now, secularism has been on the rise with the second most common response on the census being no religion, coming in at 37.2%.

All these numbers, they're not news to us. And these statistics only confirm that. But do these percentages actually reflect what we experience?

Now, when we think about our social circles and our friendship circles and our places of work, oftentimes we feel like we're the only Christian around.

[5 : 10] We may feel like such a minority that some of us may even feel discouraged to tell others that we are a Christian. And we find ourselves wondering why Jesus' kingdom feels so small and weak.

Now, if that is how we're feeling today, let's try and put ourselves in the shoes of a Jew back in the first century, in the time after Jesus' death and resurrection.

And you have just been given a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. And you're wondering to yourself, why would I want to be a part of Jesus' kingdom? If we think that Jesus' kingdom feels small and weak today, then this first group of Christians would have felt like Jesus' kingdom was microscopic and utterly fragile.

Jesus' disciples have dispersed after his crucifixion, not wanting to associate themselves with a crucified criminal. And those of us, sorry, those who have held on to their faith, gathered in house churches in and around Jerusalem, legally worshipping another king who isn't the Roman emperor.

Now, these first century disciples had much more reason to be discouraged about Jesus' kingdom feeling small and weak. Now, I have probably accomplished nothing so far but discourage you all with this bleak view of Jesus' kingdom.

[6 : 37] But we shall see from today's passage three reasons to not feel discouraged. Now, the first reason, as printed on the sermon outline, is this.

Do not be discouraged because we can fully trust in what Jesus reveals about his kingdom. Do not be discouraged because we can fully trust in what Jesus reveals about his kingdom.

So let's go to verses 34 and 35 of today's passage to find the first antidote to our discouragement. It reads, Now, as we have heard from John's sermon just a couple weeks ago, Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables to pronounce judgment against the people's already hardened hearts.

While at the same time, give understanding of Jesus' kingdom to those whose hearts are soft and open. And verse 35 here quotes from Psalm 78, which we had read to us earlier in the service by Laura.

And we see Jesus fulfilling the prophecy that points to him using parables to reveal truths about his kingdom. Now, the psalm talks about teaching the children and the coming generations about the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation.

[8 : 23] So how appropriate it is that Jesus would quote this psalm as he told these parables to reveal, as we have already heard in the past weeks, one, his kingdom's growth strategy of seed sowing, two, the varied responses that we are to expect, three, the realities of the weeds living alongside the wheat because the devil is at work amongst us, and as we will see in today's parables, how the kingdom grows.

And it is through parables that Jesus illustrates what his kingdom is like now and what it is going to look like in the future. All these truths have been given to us so that we can have confidence in Jesus' words.

And what kind of confidence can we have in all these things that Jesus revealed through the parables? We can have full confidence. Full confidence because we can fully trust in what God's chosen king says about his kingdom.

Now, how great is that? How reassuring is that? None of our earthly kings can guarantee what their kingdom will be like, especially after they're gone. Not Henry VIII, not a current king, King Charles, or any other monarch in history.

These parables aren't coming from just any earthly king who has no real control over their kingdom. They're coming from the supreme and sovereign king.

[9 : 54] Now, we're not to be, as we've read in the psalm, like the stubborn and rebellious generation whose hearts were not steadfast and whose spirits were not faithful to God. Don't harden our hearts just because the kingdom might not look like what we think it should look like.

We should have, and we can have, complete confidence and trust in Jesus' words. Because he is the one in charge of this kingdom. And not just any kingdom, but his own kingdom.

Okay, so what are the parables in today's passage saying? And this brings us to the second reason to not be discouraged. Do not be discouraged because Jesus' kingdom will start small and unimpressive before its ultimately glorious growth.

Do not be discouraged because Jesus' kingdom will start small and unimpressive before its ultimately glorious growth. So in the parable of the mustard seed, verses 31 and 32 read, 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.

[11 : 23] Now here we have a striking image of the mustard seed, a tiny seed that measures like one to two millimeters in diameter, growing into a tree between like eight to twelve feet tall, okay, much taller than me, large enough for it to have branches for birds to take shelter and to make their nests.

And this tiny mustard seed grows into the largest of all the garden plants. Now this was definitely unexpected by the crowds. The crowds listening to Jesus would have been expecting him to tell of a glorious and mighty kingdom where he as the Messiah comes and overthrows the Roman Empire to restore God's chosen people.

But instead, Jesus tells them that his kingdom was thought very small before growing to an enormous size. So this was definitely unexpected and would have come as a surprise.

However, those in the crowds familiar with the Old Testament would also have realized that Jesus was leveraging imagery found in the book of Ezekiel to reveal what his kingdom's growth will ultimately look like.

So please turn with me to Ezekiel chapter 17, verses 22 to 24, which is found on page 852 in the Church Bibles. Ezekiel chapter 17, verses 22 to 24, found on page 852 in the Church Bibles.

[12 : 58] Now it reads, Thus says the Lord God, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out.

I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar.

And under it will dwell every kind of bird. In the shade of its branches, birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

I bring low the high tree and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will do it.

Now did you notice here the parallel between the mustard seed and the cedar twig? The mustard seed becomes larger than all the garden plants, while the cedar twig planted on the mountain height of Israel grows tall into a tree, so that all the other trees in the field shall know that God is the Lord.

[14 : 15] Now these two images should encourage us. Remember that these are the words of Jesus, our King. He will do it.

And he will do it for his glory and purposes. We should be encouraged by these images and these words. And so if the rise of secularism here in the UK is making us feel discouraged, we are to be reminded and encouraged instead by the global growth of Jesus' kingdom.

Starting from Jerusalem, the gospel has reached people of all ethnicities around the world over the past 2,000 years. And according to a report titled Status of Global Christianity, the growth rate of Christians is still higher than the growth rate of people with no religion across the globe.

Now although the number of Christians in Europe and North America may have either declined or remained stagnant, the number of Christians in Africa and Asia has almost doubled in the past 23 years.

Now these are very encouraging statistics. And yet this is only a glimpse of the fulfillment of the parable of the mustard seed and this prophecy in Ezekiel.

[15 : 34] We will still wrestle with feelings of discouragement. We will still oftentimes feel like the only Christian in our workplace and our social circles. Wouldn't it just feel better if being part of Jesus' kingdom was more impressive?

We still face the reality that there are billions of unreached people around the world and that there are at least 360 million brothers and sisters in Christ persecuted around the world today.

But this reality is exactly what is being illustrated here by the parable. That the kingdom of heaven is still in a way like that single grain of mustard seed planted in the soil.

We should remind ourselves that although Jesus' kingdom has already arrived, it has not yet been consummated. Jesus' return on the final day to reign over his kingdom forever will one day arrive.

And we are to have faith that that day will come. And it is going to be a day that is going to be so much more glorious where we have eternal life with him, where death is defeated, just like the branches of the mustard tree giving life and shelter to all the birds that come to it.

[16 : 51] And everyone shall know and see that Jesus alone, the tree on the mountaintop of Zion, is Lord of all. But before that day comes, we as God's people can find encouragement from this promised glorious growth of Jesus' kingdom.

We can take comfort and refuge in God's kingdom like the birds make nests and find shelter on the branches of the mustard tree. Now let's look to the next parable to find the third reason to not feel discouraged.

Do not be discouraged because Jesus' kingdom will slowly but surely and not flashily transform our lives and the world. Do not be discouraged because Jesus' kingdom will slowly but surely and not flashily transform our lives and the world.

Verse 33 reads, Now for the keen bakers in the room, this would be a common sight for you.

But have you considered how leaven actually works? Leaven, for example, yeast or baking powder, once you put it into a mixture of flour and water, the sugars in the flour will break down into gas and alcohol and then the gas will cause the flour to rise.

[18 : 20] It doesn't happen immediately as you will know, but surely and slowly it does until the whole structure of the dough is changed. Or, in the words of this parable, the whole dough becomes all leavened.

Now over time, the effects of the leaven have pierced through the entire structure of the dough. And in other words, that's what those of us sitting in this room today who are followers of Christ have gone through.

We have experienced our lives transformed by the arrival of Jesus' kingdom. The gospel has powerfully worked itself into our lives, opened our spiritually blind eyes, and given us new life.

It has slowly but surely turned our lives completely upside down. Now each and every one of us believers will have a testimony of how our lives have gradually changed since giving it over to Jesus and as we mature in our faith.

We were all walking down the path of destruction but now are on the path towards eternal life in heaven instead. And that's only the transformation that we experience on an individual level.

[19 : 39] What about on a community or societal level? If you look at the parable again, it says that the leaven was hid in three measures of flour or in modern day units, 23 kilograms.

Now that's enough dough to feed a hundred people. Surely we're to consider the meaning of this parable on a wider scale as well. Being a citizen of Jesus' kingdom may not look impressive to the world.

It doesn't mean health, wealth, status, power, fame. Rather, it looks like being ridiculed and being persecuted for believing in Jesus.

And over the past 2,000 years, Christians spreading the gospel seed while modeling Jesus' behaviors have transformed the communities around them.

Again, like the yeast's effects, slowly but surely, the spreading of the gospel, together with acts of love flowing out in response to the good news of the gospel, have pierced into people's lives and society around them.

[20 : 46] Now, while I was preparing for this talk, I started reading a book called A Company of Heroes, Portraits from the Gospels, Global Advance by Tim Kassi.

It recorded the stories of the gospel being spread by different Christians around the world today, in Morocco, Bahrain, China, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, England, Utah, and more.

Okay. I would highly recommend giving the book a read as I have found it very encouraging to see how God has been working in all of these places. I have read about Jillian, a sister in Christ based in Morocco, sharing the gospel with Muslim neighbors over a couple of years and then finally seeing them come to faith.

I have read about Mei Li, a sister in Christ, serving in China's secret house churches and fearlessly finding ways to share the gospel with people that come to her Christian cafe and Christian bookstore.

And more close to the home and probably more relatable for those of us living in Dulwich today, I have read about Micah and Katie, a young couple living in Oxford, grasping opportunities in the academic world and in their friendship circles to share with others how the gospel has shaped their lives and their marriage.

[22 : 13] Now the point is this, it doesn't look flashy. It doesn't look impressive. The way in which all these brothers and sisters around the world are spreading the gospel and sharing it with others is something that we can all do.

The power of the gospel works slowly but surely and not flashily exactly how yeast works. And so I want to encourage us like this, whether it is being persecuted in a country where it is illegal to spread the gospel, whether it's being ridiculed by your atheist colleagues, laughed at by your non-believing schoolmates, or discouraged by a non-Christian friend who just doesn't seem to quite get the gospel.

We can be encouraged. We can be confident knowing that eventually those who accept the gospel that you share with them will have their lives radically transformed.

So keep on sowing the seed and trust. So coming to a close, let's just put ourselves back in the shoes of a Jew receiving a copy of the gospel of Matthew in the first century discouraged that Jesus' kingdom feels small and weak.

We are to be encouraged by these parables of the mustard seed and the leaven because Jesus, the king, will guarantee the growth of his own kingdom and we can trust in his words.

[23 : 40] We have either experienced the transformative power of the gospel in the lives of those who told us about Jesus and we would have experienced it ourselves. and we, now living in the 21st century, have the benefit of witnessing Jesus' kingdom spread across the world over the past 2,000 years.

We're to be even more encouraged than the first century Christians. We have plenty of reasons to trust in Jesus to expand his kingdom and transform lives by either working through us or through other people slowly but surely and not flashily.

So let's be encouraged as we continue to faithfully take part in the growth of Jesus' kingdom. Let us pray. Father God, I thank you that you have sent your son, King Jesus, to reveal to us all these wonderful truths about your heavenly kingdom to us and about how it will grow.

I pray that you would strengthen our faith to be encouraged and to trust in your beautiful words to us as we continue to proclaim the gospel. Amen. We will now break into a time of discussion groups.

I forgot to print the questions on the service sheet but I will read them out to you as you think upon what I've shared.

[25 : 12] the first question is, how are you tempted to be discouraged about Jesus' kingdom feeling small and weak? So how are you tempted to be discouraged about Jesus' kingdom feeling small and weak?

And two, how can you actively fight against feelings of discouragement about Jesus' kingdom feeling small and weak? How can you actively fight against feelings of discouragement about Jesus' kingdom feeling small and weak?

so we'll break into a time of discussion and then Andy will come back and give us a service