

16th June 2024 - SOWING THE KINGDOM

“Jesus told the crowds many parables, as much as they could understand but when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything to them”.

This is what Mark tells us **(PAUSE)**

Well, “lucky disciples” I’d say, as I wish Jesus was here to explain many of his 38 parables to us. We do love parables because we love stories Parables are not theological essays or real-life reports, they are **narratives** as things happen. But even if many of these stories seem simple and ordinary at first sight, they are in fact quite puzzling and mysterious very often. They have been described as riddles by many commentators and this is the case with the 2 we just heard....

This is not accidental of course - and I have said that several times before, but it is worth repeating I think – parables **ARE MEANT** to puzzle us, to make us uncomfortable, to unsettle us, to shock us even, as what Jesus wanted was to elicit strong reactions in order to explore an issue, generate amazement or incomprehension and **initiate a very lively debate with him:** in Jesus’ time there was no such thing as a crowd listening silently and respectfully to the parable and then walk off in silence to think about what it might mean.... Like we do for a sermon... hopefully!!! Parables were conversations, a sort of debate about their meanings, where the hearer would react, contradict, mock, challenge, express his disagreement and ask questions...

It is important to know however that Jesus didn’t originate that method of teaching. In fact, his parables represent an adaptation and an expansion of a form of wisdom **through storytelling** that already existed within Judaism, but it was used mainly by Jewish scholars and scribes. When Jesus began his teachings, he brought this elite **form of wisdom-teaching, to the common people** and transformed it into an **innovative tool that was accessible and relevant to everybody.** In other words, he “democratized” wisdom and made profound insights accessible to the common person.

So, let’s have a look if we can detect those insights, hopefully profound (!) in our two parables about seeds ... In both cases, this is about establishing the kingdom of God, the Rule of God here on earth, the most important command in Mark’s gospel: he says it 17 times, mainly in the first 5 chapters. So, that at least we can be sure of, but what follows is certainly much more tricky.

First the parable about the seed doing its bit, on its own, *with the farmer doing nothing*: does it mean that establishing the Rule of God does not require any effort from us, “que sera, sera”, sort of attitude? Surely not! In any case, the idea that a farmer, anywhere in the world does nothing after sowing, is absurd and I can easily imagine the faces of Galilean farmers who listened to Jesus: utterly puzzled I would think, and a tad angry possibly: “What does he mean, do nothing? He is mad!” What about the weeding, the watering, the manuring of the land, the monitoring of the pests and of the bugs? “Real” farmers, in contrast to “parabolic farmers”, spend a lot of time and energy, working against forces that might hinder the natural growth of the seed. But Jesus knew that, he was surrounded by farmers so he **did know** what

they were doing every day and he certainly did not need to remind them of any of their normal activities. So what is going on?

Well, I think this little parable is not about the farmer or even about the seed but **about the soil** and of course it reminds us of the longer parable which precedes this one in the same chapter of Mark, the Parable of the Sower who sows seeds on different soils, getting **different results**. If the soil is good, the seed grows and give a good harvest. So the farmer may not know the entire scientific process of the growth, the right concentration of minerals, whether the soil is alkaline or not but he recognizes a good fertile soil. So every day, he continues to lead a normal life, doing his day to day activities, going to bed, sleeping, getting up and **trusting** that the thing he planted deep in the soil is developing into something valuable, mysteriously may be, but growing nonetheless because the soil is good.

Translating this into establishing the Rule of God, I don't think it can be explained by allegory, as it has often been done, by saying that the growth of the seed is an allegory for the growth of the gospel or the growth of your faith. Parables are not allegories, they are **comparisons**, analogies of 2 things put side by side: This is what the Greek word means. So, in the case of this particular parable, I think it means that we need to continue our efforts day after day, that we continue to lead a life of service the best we can and trust that the Rule of God will grow... somehow: The justice we work for, the time we spend in volunteering or study or prayer or meditation might not produce immediate results, but they do contribute to establishing the Rule of God, because that growth is **irrepressible like the growing of a seed in a good soil**. Keep that thought

PAUSE

Now for the second parable, the tiny mustard seed which becomes the biggest of bushes. It is only Matthew and Luke who talked about a tree, Mark, the first Gospel, says bush. Now the 2 traditional ways of understanding the parable is as an allegory or as a moral encouragement: First the allegory: just like the mustard seed starts small and grows, so might your faith if you tend it... mmnn, it could be, may be... I am personally not convinced but it is possible.

Now for the second possibility, the moral encouragement: sometimes very large things have small beginnings, so don't be discouraged if you exercise your faith in small ways, because God will use it to do great things. Again, it is possible, why not as there is nothing dramatically wrong with these interpretations. In fact, I think they convey an important element of this parable: the kingdom of God and its importance may appear quite modest and yet exert significant, even surprising influence. **But I would like to offer you another interpretation** because if all Jesus was saying is that the kingdom of God starts small and grows large, any seed would do, as all seeds start small and are transformed into something much larger. But he chose to say that the Kingdom of God is not like any old seed but like a **mustard seed**...

Well, if our Galilean farmers listening to our first parable might have been a bit angry, I can easily imagine them now shaking their head in disbelief when they heard that one: A mustard seed? What? Because it is indeed a ridiculous thing to say...

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Why? Because it is like comparing the Kingdom of God to a dandelion or a nettle or a bind weed ... YEP ...because in the Israel of Jesus' time, the **wild mustard plant**, not the cultivated one, was a **weed**. It grew to around 5 or 6 feet, was very prolific and could pop up almost anywhere and started multiplying and once it appeared, it easily took over. Now about the mustard seed being the smallest of the seeds but becoming the largest of bushes, well neither are true as the mustard bush is not the largest of all shrubs and neither is the mustard seed the smallest: **in any case the Greek text does NOT say “the smallest seed” but “THE LEAST of all seeds”**. This is important precisely because it is a seed which brings forth a common weed, one that is rather unimpressive, held in low account but quite dangerous ...

So what is going on again? Why on earth do Jesus compare the kingdom of God to that particular weed? Well, I would contend that, faithful to his purpose of shocking people out of their comfort zone, this parable would certainly challenge them and cause frustration ... like may be, it does you !!! **I hope so!!!!** Wild mustard is incredibly hard to control and dangerous, as I just mentioned, because once it takes root, it can take over a whole planting area after it had started to creep over the side of an open hill or abandoned field nearby. And this is what Jesus says is the kingdom is like: not like a mighty cedar of Lebanon full of majesty and not quite like a common annoying but inoffensive weed, but like a pungent shrub with the dangerous tendency to takeover. **And I think that's the point: this kingdom Jesus proclaims isn't something we can control. And it's definitely not safe, not safe that is, for the kingdoms of this world which thrive on violent domination and excessive power, contrary of course to God's kingdom**. Only the Rule of God that Jesus has announced if we follow him, is able to overturn those kingdoms **in an irrepressible way**, exactly like the seed of the first parable whose growth is irrepressible. So instead of violence, corruption, greed and inequality, the Rule of God offers justice, sharing of resources and compassion **but it is up to us to make it happen, day after day**.

AMEN