

## **Small beginnings**

**Mark 4:21-34**

**Covenant Waterfall, 21 June 2020**

Read

Pray

### **Introduction**

Some years ago, at the church I used to work for, we invited a famous Sharks rugby player to the launch of an evangelistic course, which would run over some weeks. The idea was to attract lots of people from the community, through having this famous guy, and that they would carry on coming for the course and hear the gospel. Well, stacks of people arrived on the evening to see this guy. Yet the following week, when the course actually started, there were just the usual suspects from the church there. Not one of the hundreds of people who came to see their rugby hero stuck around!

Point of this story? Beware of using worldly fame and power to try and grow the church. This points to a sinful tendency among us that finds worldly power, glory and success very attractive. There is this pressure to build these fancy, glitzy, slick churches, the more people the better – and using whatever gimmicks to get people there is justified. Whether its rugby players, actors, famous artists or even politicians – do whatever it takes to make ourselves attractive to the culture. Look successful and glorious in the world's eyes, and then they'll join us!

The problem with all this is that when we look at Jesus' life, we see precisely the opposite of this. As we've already seen in going through these first few chapters of Mark's Gospel – he was by worldly standards, insignificant – peasant stock, while he attracted plenty of attention, he actually had a very small following. He was detested by many, ridiculed even by his own family, and as we'll see in the weeks to come, he died a criminal's death on the cross.

In these three parables which we are going to look at, we are going to see that though Jesus, the gospel he preached and his church appears foolish and insignificant in worldly terms, there will come a day when his kingdom is revealed in glory for what it really is, and then every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Point? Don't despise the day of small beginnings. See this through:

- Lamp under the basket, vv. 21-25
- Parable of the seed growing, vv. 26-29
- Parable of the mustard seed, vv. 30-34

#### **A. Lamp under the basket, vv. 21-25**

(vv. 21-23) **“And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? <sup>22</sup> For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. <sup>23</sup> If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”**

Remember from last week, Jesus begins to teach the crowds a series of parables – stories that illustrate a greater theological truth – that show us something about the nature of his kingdom and his gospel. Heard the first parable last week – parable of the soils (parable of the sower), now we hear three more shorter parables – all making a similar point: don't despise the day of small beginnings.

Here, in this first parable, Jesus says that when you bring a lamp into a room, you don't hide it under something, but you place it in such a way that it illumines the whole room. Bringing the light into a dark room will expose things for what they really are. After being hidden in darkness, veiled in secret, the lamp brings it all out into the light.

What is Jesus trying to say through this parable? At this point in Jesus' ministry, his glory is very much veiled. While he is God's promised Messiah, who has come to save his people from their sins, the divine Son of God – who he is, is not immediately clear for everyone to see. He appears to many to be a man of peasant stock who is teaching and preaching and doing miraculous signs.

This is why we have seen the range of responses towards him – the Pharisees think he is demonic, his family think he is a nut case, the crowds just want miracles from him, it's only a small group of disciples that have truly left everything to follow him.

Yes – seeing some glimpses of who he really is – miracles, driving out demons – point to his divinity – but these are very much glimpses, open to interpretation – hence Pharisees attribute his power to Satan, family – he's raving mad. Who he really is has not yet been fully revealed.

Yet there will come a day when who Jesus really is will be plain for all to see. There will come a time when there will be no doubt as to who he is. On that day, he will return to earth in all his glory, as the divine Son of God, to usher in his kingdom rule on earth, and on that day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. Everyone – both believers and unbelievers will acknowledge him for who he is – no exceptions.

Jesus' veiled earthly ministry is like the room that is cloaked in darkness. Yet one day a lamp will shine in the room, bringing to light who he really is. The point of this parable is to reveal who Jesus really is.

Jesus then continues, expanding upon the parable (vv.24-25):

**<sup>24</sup> And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. <sup>25</sup> For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."**

What is Jesus saying here? How does it connect with what he has just said? Twice in these few verses, Jesus has said to his hearers, "listen carefully!", "Pay attention!" Understand who he really is, receive him, his gospel now. Those who receive Christ and his gospel with joy and eagerness now – knowing the Christ has taken upon himself your sins and faced God's wrath on our behalf, forgiving us our sins, having peace with God and assurance of eternal life. How much more joy and blessing will you know when he returns, and you enter into everlasting life with him in the new creation? If you have Christ now, you will receive much more than you already have, in the age to come.

Yet to those who reject Christ now, and resist his gospel, you will lose everything on the day he returns. God will be just in condemning you in his wrath eternally for your own sins. So listen up now and pay attention, as how you respond to Christ now will have eternal consequences!

#### **B. Parable of the seed growing, vv. 26-29**

**<sup>26</sup> And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”**

In this second parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a man who sows seed and pretty much does nothing and then all of a sudden there is a fruitful crop ready to be harvested.

What is then the meaning of this parable? As we saw from last week, in the parable of the soils, the seed represents the Word of God, the gospel. It has the same meaning here as well. The man who sows the seed is Jesus, and can also represent anyone else who preaches his gospel. Whenever the gospel is preached, it is like seed is sown on the ground. Once the seed of the gospel has been sown, the sower – the preacher’s work is done. For some time it may look as if nothing is happening.

Jesus preached for three years, and all he had to show for it was twelve disciples, plus some others who were following him. Faithful gospel preaching and teaching may appear fruitless for years. You can slog away at preaching Sunday after Sunday and on the surface see very little change or growth in people. We’re in the early stages of this church plant – it’s easy to look around and think, not much is happening from a human perspective, where are the hundreds of people flocking to our church?

Yet this parable shows us that true gospel growth takes time. The seed doesn’t grow up instantly, it happens slowly, without the sower even realising how it happens.

But the important thing we can see in this parable, is that though the process may be slow and unspectacular, we are promised that there will be growth, there will one day be a

fruitful harvest. That growth may come in months or years, or it may only be evident in the final harvest, when Jesus himself returns.

The other thing we are pointed to here is the sovereignty of God. There is nothing that the preacher can do to make that gospel seed grow and be fruitful. This is why it says in verse 27, **“He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how”**. All the preacher must do is to faithfully sow the seed – faithfully preach the gospel. Don’t rely on gimmicks, on bringing in famous people, on the bells and whistles, thinking that these things will transform hearts. They may draw a crowd, but they can never produce true gospel growth and fruitfulness. Only God can do that, and the way in which he has chosen to do so is through the preaching of the gospel – sowing the gospel seed.

And it’s not even in the preacher’s power that makes the seed sprout and grow – he doesn’t know how that happens. As verse 28 continues to explain, the growth happens from the seed itself, in the earth. There is latent potential within the seed which starts to grow. It’s God’s Spirit miraculously applying the gospel to people’s hearts that produces growth and fruitfulness. The preacher cannot make it happen – he is actually entirely passive in the process – as we saw in verse 27, he goes to sleep and wakes up in the morning and gets on with his life. And in the meantime, the seed grows into a fruitful harvest.

Though Jesus’ three years of earthly ministry resulted only in a small band of followers, was it then a waste of time? Of course not! It may have appeared so to many people living at the time of Christ. Yet we know that those gospel seeds that he sowed during those three years, blossomed and are still producing abundant fruit today. Because his word has **“spirit and life”** as John 6:63 tells us, the preaching of his word will always bring life and a fruitful harvest. It may take time, but there will always be a harvest – so don’t despise the day of small beginnings!

### **C. The parable of the mustard seed, vv. 30-34**

<sup>30</sup> And he said, **“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger**

than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

**<sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. <sup>34</sup> He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.**

In this last parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed – a very small seed. Yet it soon grows into a great tree, where many benefit from it.

Like the previous two parables, the message of this parable is very similar. Jesus’ ministry, and subsequent gospel ministry, is often characterised by weakness and insignificance. We’ve already seen that Jesus did not appear as powerful or successful in worldly standards. He was rejected by his own, he was mocked and ridiculed and ended up on the cross. Similarly, when we look at much of the church today, we are often ridiculed, mocked and persecuted, we are accused of preaching a foolish message, we struggle in small congregations and it can appear from the outside that we are shrinking, irrelevant and fading into obscurity.

Yet what this parable shows us is that, though the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, it insignificant from a human perspective, it will grow one day into a great tree, providing shelter and shade for many.

There will come a day when those whom have **“sown with tears will reap with songs of joy.”** (Psalm 126:5). What was once seen as insignificant and foolish – Jesus’ earthly ministry and his church – will be finally revealed in the light for what it is. On that day, Jesus will return to this earth, not as a humble servant, but instead as God eternal himself – the divine Son of Man in all his glory. The Apostle John describes him in Revelation 1:13-16 -

**“A son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash round his chest. <sup>14</sup> The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, <sup>15</sup> his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. <sup>16</sup> In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.**

There will be no doubt as to who Jesus is any more. He will be revealed for who he is, bringing forth his perfect kingdom rule upon this earth. We, his church, once weak, struggling, persecuted and ridiculed, will be glorified in him and will be his pure, radiant, holy and spotless bride (Eph 5:27), who will reign with him for all eternity. The little mustard seed will one day grow into the greatest of all trees!

## **Conclusion**

Looking at these three parables, as Christ's church, we should resist the temptation to seek after worldly glory and popularity and fame now. The reality is that for now, we are not promised much glory – we are promised that we will endure tough times and the ridicule of the world. We are only pilgrims on this earth, on a journey to a heavenly country, where our true citizenship lies. One day our Saviour will return in glory to redeem us and raise us up in glory with him for all eternity.

In the meantime, we can take comfort that it's not up to our gimmicks, skills and ingenuity that grows the church. We've been called to sow gospel seeds – preach Christ's life-giving Word, and it is he who promises, in his own time, to raise up a fruitful and abundant harvest of souls for his glory.

Brothers and sisters, friends, where are you with the Lord? Are you like the one in the parable who has up till this point, resisted Christ's gospel, who as Jesus describes in verse 25 who **"has not, even what he has will be taken away"** and will face the wrath of God for all eternity? The point of these parables is to shake us up to the reality that though receiving Christ and his gospel may seem foolish now, he will return one day in all his splendour and everyone will see him for who he is.

Therefore, receive Christ with joy and eagerness this evening, know he removes your sins as far as the east is from the west, know his steadfast love, peace and assurance of eternal life with God. For those who have this – salvation in Christ – we are promised that indeed more will be given – a glorious eternity as Christ's pure, spotless bride – his people, dwelling forever with him, our majestic Lord.

Amen

