

JESUS THE TEACHER

(Mark 4.21-34)

Introduction

Have you ever listened to *Just a Minute* on Radio 4? It's an entertainment show in which contestants have to speak for a full minute on a given subject without hesitation, repetition, deviation or repetition. It's really hard to do. It's rare to get past 20 seconds or so without a challenge from a fellow contestant.

If Jesus ever went on *Just a Minute*, he could easily talk for a minute on the kingdom of God without pausing for thought, drifting off topic or using a word more than once.

Jesus is the greatest teacher the world has ever known. Unlike any other leader of his day, he spoke with *authority*. He never needed fancy visual aids, or gimmicks, or flip charts, or PowerPoint. Instead, he told simple stories. Parables.

Chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel has a selection of four of them together, each one making a slightly different point. Today, we're going to look at the three shorter ones, but there are forty different parables in the gospels, and there may well have been countless others.

Verses 33-34 say "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, *as much as they could understand...* but when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything."

What Is a Parable?

What Is a Parable? Firstly, it's a story and people love stories especially if they're well told. When our children were small they used to listen to Johnny Morris reading Thomas the Tank Engine on tape. He did all the voices and noises, adlibbing in his lilting Welsh accent... He was brilliant. He was so good, they could sit for hours in rapt attention.

J. K. Rowling once said that stories "can transport people to another place." Whenever I'm preaching, I see people just longing to be transported to another place! I see people looking at their phones, or glazing over, or staring longingly out

the window, or gazing disconsolately at their watch, or properly nodding off and dribbling at the corner of their mouth...

But as soon as I tell a story, people instantly wake from their slumber and look up.

A parable is more than a story though. Someone called Jesus' parables "earthly stories with a heavenly point." Parables are stories with a *meaning*. The Hare and the Tortoise is not just the tale of a race between two animals. It has a meaning – or a *moral* if you like; "never give up and don't be too smug."

More than that, Jesus' parables are stories with a *mirror*. They show us things about ourselves that we might be blind to. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Pharisees were forced to look at themselves as the hard-hearted passers-by.

But more than that even, Jesus' parables are stories with a *mystery*. Some people get it. Some don't. They open up truth for people who are looking for it but they hid truth from Jesus' enemies.

The Growing Seed (v26-29)

The first story here is the parable of the growing seed (v26-29). Have you ever planted seeds and watched them grow? Jesus said that the kingdom of God is a bit like that.

Every single plant on the face of the earth started out as a seed. Every seed is packed with all the instructions and nutrients it needs to become a plant.

Jesus says here "the seed sprouts and grows, though no one knows how."

We know that as a seed soaks up water, the food stored inside begins to be converted into energy in the form of enzymes. That starts the process of sending out roots and sprouting the first parts of the plant. But exactly *how* all this works is still a bit of a mystery. Scientists still don't fully understand it all.

There are two things any farmer has to have.

Firstly, patience. Between sowing seeds and reaping plants, you have to wait *months*. You can't speed it up. Apples appear on your tree in July but they're not sweet enough to eat until September. Or in the case of the apples in the vicarage garden – *never*.

There's no such thing as quick returns for a farmer. You have to wait. And in life, you have to wait for God. Everything happens in *his* time.

Messy Church is an environment where we sow many seeds. It is a fantastic opportunity to share faith. You don't always see much in terms of growth. That's because a lot of it is underground. Spiritual growth, says Jesus, is a continual, gradual process; it's slow - but sure.

The second thing a farmer needs is confidence. "A man scatters seed on the ground," says Jesus. He doesn't just do it for the physical exercise. He does it because he expects it will be worth his while. It doesn't occur to him that nothing will happen.

"All by itself," says Jesus, "the soil produces grain." The Greek word for "all by itself" is *automaté*. It's automatic.

Every dry, shrivelled, wrinkled seed has, packed inside it, enough power to crack concrete. You can be confident that God's Word has the power to give life, to save souls and change hearts. Only God can give spiritual growth, only God can produce spiritual life from nothing.

The Mustard Seed (v30-32)

Jesus starts his next parable in v30 with a couple of questions. "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? Or what parable shall we use to describe it?"

Imagine everyone's interest when Jesus asks this question. Oooh, what is the kingdom of God like? Everyone present thinks 'grand and impressive'.

- The kingdom of God is like a glorious marble palace, overlaid with gold and ivory.
- Or the kingdom of God is like a majestic mountain range, enduring, touching the heavens.

And Jesus looks around and picks a pod of seeds off a nearby mustard plant and says, "Actually no; it's more like one of these." People are squinting to try and see what's he's got between his thumb and index finger. It's the size of a pin head!

He picks the smallest, least impressive seed they know about; you can fit hundreds of them in one hand.

But mustard plants in the Middle-East in exceptional circumstances can grow up to 20 feet tall.

Here's the point. Don't worry about unimpressive beginnings.

Take Jesus' disciples for example.

Essentially they were 12 half-wits:

- who argued among themselves about who was the best
- who never seemed to understand a word Jesus said
- who never caught one fish without Jesus having to do a miracle
- who fell asleep when -three times- Jesus told them to stay awake
- who ran like chickens at the first sign of trouble
- who denied ever knowing him hours after swearing they'd die with him
- who hid behind locked doors, cowering in fear
- and were slow to believe he had risen from the dead

Whenever you feel a bit useless, you can always cheer yourself up by reminding yourself that the twelve men Jesus chose as his team really were clueless.

They had no natural talent, they were slow to learn, they made massive mistakes, and they barely had any faith despite being around Jesus all day. Yet Jesus chose them, and loved them, and made something of them.

That's the mustard seed. Acts 1 tells us that there were only 120 in the upper room when the church was born. Then there were 3,000. Then there were 5,000.

The religious authorities tried to suppress it but they found they couldn't stop it.

The Roman Empire battered it but it grew faster than they could throw it to the lions.

All through history we've been ridiculed, suppressed and misrepresented. They've burned our books and demolished our buildings. But from 120 people, there are now millions of us and the movement has taken root in every continent and every country.

From one pitiful, sorry little seed, is coming the greatest kingdom the world has yet seen, ruled by the King of kings whose reign will never end. It will one day comprise a multitude no one can number from every tribe, tongue, people and nation.

Never mind the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the European Union, or the Russian and American superpowers; whatever political and military structures man creates, the kingdom of God will supplant them all.

And it all began with the mustard seed of a dead leader and twelve nobodies.

That's the kingdom of God. This is who we are.

The Lamp on the Stand (v21-23)

So, what are you going to take away from church today? Jesus says (v21-23) that if a lamp doesn't help people see it is useless. The kingdom life has to be shared. If you have received the love of Christ and the joy of the Holy Spirit, then let it all out!

Think about your life. Do you think it shows people how to find God? Does it show people what it's like to live in the kingdom of God?

Ending (v24-25)

And finally v24-25. "Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

I used to think "that's not fair!" But it's nothing to do with fairness. It's like learning the piano. If you learn the notes, and exercise your fingers and practice your scales you will improve as a musician. If you neglect it, the little talent you had will get rustier and rustier.

Would you say it's not fair that someone who never practices the piano can't play it?

Before the kingdom can be shared it has to be received. If you don't want to grow in faith, you'll lose what little you have. Those who harden their hearts end up with nothing.

But the open hearted, open minded, among Jesus' hearers get more out of it. Every time you open your hands to receive, you'll receive a bit more.

Let's pray...