

### 3. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

(Matt. 13: 31-21)

As we continue our study of the Parables of Christ, let's take a moment to remind ourselves that these simple, easy-to-understand stories have deeper meanings; those might take a little more attention to find. In the gospel according to St. Matthew we read,

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:  
“I will open My mouth in parables;  
I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.”

(Matt. 13: 34-5)

The Prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup> speaks of people who are hearing but don't understand, and who are seeing but don't really perceive -- that is to say, their ears and eyes are working but they don't really get the message.

And what is it that the Prophet, and now Jesus Himself, is telling us is the real message behind these parables? Nothing less than the “things kept secret from the foundation of the world”!

Jesus is truly revealing the mysteries of the universe, He is teaching about the Kingdom of God, about all the unseen truths. In today's parable, He begins to describe exactly what the Kingdom of God is like. He'll use many parables to express a lot of ideas that are so big that they're hard to understand!

Now remember -- Jesus teaches in parables, and some of our hearts are open to receive His message, and some are not. It's our job to keep our hearts open, to be the ones Christ is talking to when He says: “those who have ears to hear, let them hear!”

In the past weeks, we've looked at two of the parables Jesus taught. Remember that He really wants to reach every one of us, no matter where we are or what kind of life we lead -- so these two parables were both about farming. That is a simple topic that everyone, rich or poor, knows about. We all pretty much understand that you can plant a seed in the ground, and it grows into a plant.

Jesus doesn't want to talk to just the educated people, or just the smartest people. He is talking to everyone, so He uses topics that make sense to everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 6: 9-10

The first two parables we discussed were about seeds:

In *The Parable of the Sower*, seeds are planted in different kinds of soil. Hard soil or rocky soil doesn't produce much, but those seeds that fall on really good soil will become strong plants that yield much fruit! The seeds are like the word of God, and our hearts are the soil. Will we keep our hearts open and soft and ready to grow our faith, or will let them be hard and rocky, so that the word of God never grows there?

In *The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*, we saw that the word of God is not the only kind of seed out there! There's a bad kind of seed that the enemy sows. These grow tares among the wheat, and they look a lot alike. God lets the good and bad grow side by side, and He will separate them later. But for now, the tares are right next to the wheat, and they could maybe choke out the wheat! We need to watch out for those tares and not let them choke us out -- we must be vigilant, watching out for evil.

That's a lot to learn from these seeds, and Jesus wasn't finished yet! Right after those two parables, Jesus told another one, and it was all about (*you guessed it!*) seeds! This next one is called, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed".

In his gospel, St. Matthew tells us what Jesus said:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

(Matt. 13: 31-32)

If you have ever seen a mustard seed, you know that it's very, very small. It's one of the smallest seeds out there. And in fact, back in Jesus' time there was a saying -- *that's as small as a mustard seed!* But Jesus points out something really interesting: this teeny tiny mustard seed gets planted, and then it turns into a really huge plant! There are some other herbs that start with big seeds, but the tiny mustard seed grows even bigger than they do! In hot climates like Israel or Judea, where Jesus and his audience were living, that tiny mustard seed grows into a strong and wonderful tree, and it's very bushy, and the birds love to nest in it. They find really a lot of safe little spots, and a whole flock can fit in the one mustard tree.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus mentions the birds? In the other parables, it was good enough for the seed to grow into a plant that yields a lot of fruit. And the mustard seed does have fruit -- it grows mustard. But it's more than that: the mustard seed creates a home for the birds of the air.

*So the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... how so? Can you think of any guesses?*

There's actually more than one answer, which is another really interesting thing about Parables. These simple stories can give us so much information about the deep truths Jesus wants us to understand.

We were just talking about how all those birds find a home in that huge mustard tree. If the Kingdom of Heaven is a mustard seed, then it can grow and grow and grow -- and it can be big enough to have room for everyone.

Remember that Israel had been waiting for a Savior, a Messiah to come, and they knew that He would be the King of Kings and save Israel. So if some of them recognized that Jesus was this very King of Kings, then they expected Him to save just them, just God's people, the Jews.

But just like they would think a mustard seed is so tiny, they might underestimate Jesus. He's not here to save just some of the people -- He is here for all of the people. This Kingdom is not just a small Kingdom that rules over one nation on earth; He is not about to be the King of Israel. Like the mustard seed, this Kingdom is much, much bigger and it has room for everyone -- it will grow and grow! The Kingdom of Heaven is a lot bigger than they think it's going to be!

This parable teaches us other things too.

For one thing, we might think about Jesus' disciples. They didn't look like much to start out. Some of them were fishermen, Matthew was a tax collector -- they weren't great men, and they certainly didn't have a lot of power or status in the society around them, and yet the power of the Kingdom was inside of them! They would preach the gospel and work miracles, and from this small beginning the Church would grow and grow!

But it's not just about the disciples! Let's think about Jesus Himself -- how did He come into the world?

Jesus is the King of Kings, but He wasn't born in a palace! He was born in the most humble way possible -- in a manger with the animals, and to a family in the unpopular and unattractive little town of Nazareth. Jesus starts out with humble beginnings, and someone looking at that child probably wouldn't guess that He would be the King of Kings, that someday He would return in Glory and all of the world would bend a knee and offer Him worship! The Kingdom of God is like that -- it starts out small and humble, but it will grow into something glorious and enormous!

In a way, Jesus is the mustard seed Himself!

Here's something really neat: think about what Jesus said in the gospel of John:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone: but if it dies, it produces much grain.”

(John 12:24)

One little single spike of wheat has lots of grains on it -- maybe 35 or 50 of these little seeds. Jesus points out that if you have just one of those little grains of wheat and you don't plant it, you will only have just that one grain... but if you do plant it, then it will grow into a whole new wheat plant, and it will produce a lot more grains!

Now here's the mind-blowing part. We take the seed or the grain, and we pick it off the plant. It dies. Then we bury it in the ground, and new life grows out of it. The seed dies, but then it transforms into a living plant! *Now think about Jesus:* He dies on the cross and then He is buried in His tomb, and then what? He rises from the dead! He tramples down death by death! He resurrects, breaking open the gates of Hades and setting everyone free! By giving His one life, He makes it possible for everyone to have eternal life!

- This one humble Boy born in a manger becomes the King of Kings -- something small like a mustard seed grows into something enormous.
- That humble Man, hung on a cross and buried in a tomb, defeats death and grants us life.
- And this Messiah who comes to Israel, saves not just one people, but all the people of the world -- every nation, throughout all history and into all future!
- And from this small group of disciples, the Church will grow and grow and everyone on earth will hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed indeed -- it seems small, but it grows into something so amazingly big!

That's really a lot to teach with just one sentence about one tiny seed. Whoa! That's like our mustard seed too! Parables look like something small, the stories seem so simple, but they have a whole universe of meaning inside them!

And finally -- we think of how the sower plants seeds in different kinds of soil, and that seed is the word of God, and the soil is our hearts. That mustard seed is like that tiny seed of faith that God has planted in your heart: if you take care of it, if you water it with the sacraments and prayer, it will grow into such a big faith and it will bear so much fruit! Maybe it will even

become something so beautiful and so generous that it gives refuge to the birds of the air and to the people who need God's love!

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## QUESTIONS:

Once again, Jesus teaches by using a parable that the people can all understand, and His parable includes seeds and growth. What kind of seed is this parable about and why is it special?

- *This parable is all about a mustard seed. Mustard seeds are super tiny, but they grow into a big plant!*

Of course the Parable of the Mustard Seed is not just about a tiny seed growing into something big, is it? Can you tell about at least one thing the parable teaches us?

- *Here are a few things the Parable of the Mustard Seed teaches us: the parable is about the humble Boy born in a manger who becomes the King of Kings. It's about The humble Man, hung on a cross and buried in a tomb, who defeats death and gives us life. It's about The Messiah who comes to Israel, and then saves not just one people, but all the people of the world! It's about a small group of humble disciples, who grow the Church until everyone on earth hears the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's about the Kingdom of God, which seems small, but grows into something so amazingly big!*

How does this parable relate to the idea of the other parables we've talked about, where we were focusing on making sure our hearts are "good soil"?

- *The mustard seed is like a tiny seed of faith that God has planted in our hearts: if we take care of it, watering it with the sacraments and prayer, it will grow into such a big faith and it will bear so much fruit!*

## FOR DISCUSSION:

*Tiny mustard seeds have a kind of superpower: they are tiny, but they grow into a big plant that provides helpful shade and shelter for the birds.*

*Each one of us has some pretty "super" powers, too: God has created each of us to do things that are helpful for those around us. Talk together about this. For example, "Mom's super power is that she is always there to make me feel better when I'm hurt or sad. Joey's super power is that he can make me*

*laugh like no one else can. Sariya's super power is drawing pictures and bringing joy to everyone when she gives them away." You get the idea.*

*So, maybe you can't see what is super about you. That's okay! It's better for you to see something super about each other person who you are with right now. Take some time to tell them what their super power is! When you've all had a turn, talk about this: did any of the "super" powers that others see in you surprise you? How does it make you feel to know that the tiny "mustard seed" things that you do can make a big difference in these other people's lives?*