

**SERMON AT GELORUP: GEOFF CHADWICK: 13/6/2021:
SUNDAY BETWEEN 12-18 JUNE (OS11)
Mk 4:26-34
AN EARTHLY STORY WITH A HEAVENLY MEANING**

Mark 4.26-34

²⁶ He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.' ³⁰ He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' ³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Have you ever been proud of your father? Maybe or maybe not – depending on your father, but I've been proud, and there's a particular incident I'd like to tell you about. It happened during a sermon! I think I was about 12 years old. One time, when listening to a sermon the preacher asked: "Does anyone know what a parable is?" Quick as a flash, my Dad, sitting next to me called out: "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning!"

"That' right" said the preacher. "I could think of no better answer!"

And at that moment I knew I was the son of a great theologian!

Later in life when I was learning to become a theologian, my Dad proof-read every essay I ever wrote. He went to school in the 1930s, left school at 14 to earn money during the depression, and long before the *Australian Curriculum* was devised, was supremely skilled at spelling and grammar!

The night I graduated with my Theology Degree he whispered into my ear – "I think that one's for me. After all I read everything you wrote!"

So my Dad's definition has stuck: "A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." It makes me wonder though: had he heard that as a little boy in a Sunday school class? If he did, I'm remembering it now, second hand, some 90 years later! Oral tradition is not just a thing of the past!

Now in today's Gospel reading, Jesus is teaching in parables. After delivering them he then goes on to explain their meaning to his disciples. He does this in private. Why?

I think the Gospel writer(Mk) wants to highlight the incomprehension of the disciples. They don't understand! They must learn! Jesus too, is painted as the great rabbi. He must do what great rabbis do – teach!

In a sense, the parables are left meaningless unless the rabbi teaches, and unless the students (disciplined ones (disciples)) learn.

Yes a parable might be fun to listen to, it might be entertaining, but without reflection it's just a story story.

So here's my reflection!

As I read the parable of the mustard seed I think it's a parable within a parable within a parable within a parable within a parable!

I mean-there are at least 4 earthly settings and four heavenly meanings.

Firstly, there's the original setting.

Here, near the lake, Jesus tells the parable to a large crowd of villagers. It's a motley mob listening in anticipation for some great message.

Do they get fine oratory like that of Shakespeare's Henry 5th before the troops on the eve of the battle of Agincourt? No!

Do they get a Churchillian rallying call to *fight them on the beaches*? No!

Do we get one of Ron Barassi's coaching "sprays" to fire up his languishing football players? No?

What we get are parables. Simple earthly stories with hidden heavenly meanings. For some, the story doesn't mean much. But for others it contains a heavenly truth far greater than the external packaging.

Could it mean that the would one day be great? Perhaps!

Secondly, there's the biblical setting.

Mk preserved the story and put it in his Gospel. Why? Maybe it's a parable of the Gospel itself. The earthly story is actually that of Jesus' on earth. A story of a man, an extrodianry man yes, but one who came to us humbly, one who lived a life just as we do, and one who died the death of an innocent criminal. That's an earthly story – but boy does it have a heavenly meaning! Yes! This is the kingdom of God at work. And if you were a farmer of that century you would believe that a seed must die before it is reborn into a great and luscious tree.

Thirdly, there's the early church setting.

The early church, battered and bruised by persecution began to wonder.

"Is it worth it? Is our little grain of faith going to prosper? Must we all die before anything great happens?"

Mk recollects the earthly mustard seed story and repackages it into a heavenly message for the fledgling church.

This parable is what the Scholar Joachim Jeremias calls a parable of "Great Assurance". He puts it like this:

Could this wretched band, comprising so many disreputable characters, be the wedding-guests of God's redeemed community? "Yes", says Jesus "it is".

With the same compelling certainty that causes a small shrub to grow out of a minute grain of mustard-seed... will God's miraculous power cause my small band to swell into the mighty host of the people of God in the Messianic Age, embracing the Gentiles..[?]

(Jeremias, J.,1972, *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM: London p 149)

The answer of course is "Yes". This parable is a heavenly word of assurance to an early church caught up in the pressures of a very earthly world.

Fourthly, There's our Setting.

What use could a 2000 year old story about a seed becoming a tree be to us today? Is our modern world looking in all the wrong places for a glimpse of God's kingdom. Is it looking for a Henry 5th, a Churchill or even a Barassi? Perhaps this is looking in the wrong place. Maybe, just maybe, God's kingdom is glimpsed on the faces of those diligent and exhausted researchers who, beyond all expectation developed a Corona Virus vaccine in record time. Or maybe it's found on the face of a parent, hoping and praying they will survive their child's adolescence. Maybe its found on the face of a willing mind in an ailing body. And just so, it's found in those small acts of service that come our way when we least expect them.

Yes we have a parable, within a parable, within a parable, within a parable!

May its meanings grow on us and my our earthly story reflect its heavenly meanings!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.