

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.”

Of all the messages of Jesus this one is likely the smallest, the simplest. I think we love it because of that. It fits in our pocket. We can have it with us without effort.

It's form fits its function. It speaks about the power of the small and the parable itself is small. It speaks especially to those of us who feel that our faith is small, helping us believe that even so we can overcome. Or perhaps it is not our faith that seems small as much as the obstacles it seeks to overcome which seem large. Saint Matthew records in his gospel Jesus telling his disciples that if they had faith even the size of a mustard seed they would be able to accomplish anything, even commanding a mountain to move from here to there. It's reassuring. It helps us feel that even though our faith may be small at times, we may still have a place

in the kingdom. Most importantly perhaps, it affirms for us something we need to know: that faith is the road to empowerment for us all.

So the parable of the Mustard Seed is about the small overcoming the great. It builds on our first reading, from Ezekiel in which the Lord tells us through the prophet:

“I bring low the high tree,  
I make high the low tree”

In His characteristically playful manner Jesus refers to Ezekiel with a touch of irony, a bit of a smirk or a twinkle in His eye. In His telling, the mustard seed of faith grows not into a ‘lofty cedar tree’ but into ‘the greatest of all shrubs.’ Shades of Robert the Shrubber for those of us whose minds go there. [If your mind doesn’t, not to worry. You’re probably just as glad to be missing a Monty Python reference, and I tip my hat to you.] Like the greatest of all shrubs, the kingdom is mighty in its smallness and small in its mightiness and somehow only to be glimpsed in the paradox those two qualities present.

So the parable, and the kingdom, is about the small overcoming the great through its very smallness perhaps. That's true I think, but it is not *only* about that. There's also the fact that mustard is a weed and like all weeds it creeps in everywhere and is extremely difficult to get rid of. Pliny the Elder, writing about 78AD wrote that mustard "grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once." The kingdom is kind of like that, as is the faith of Jesus Christ. It spreads everywhere and is hard to get rid of. People who have it tend to become very tenacious.

A colleague of mine, in ministry in Latin America is fond of a proverb she hears there: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds." So it is with Christians and the kingdom.

It's also true, as Pliny points out, that the weed improves by being transplanted. When we are intentional about developing our Christian faith, it is improved and strengthened greatly, although some people will think we are cultivating a weed.

It's kind of like planting a garden of dandelions - something none of us would likely do, although there is no doubt it could be a

great success, but I'm not sure we'd be thanked for it. 'The kingdom of God is like carefully cultivating dandelions' comes close to the tone of playful absurdity Jesus is expressing in the Parable of the Mustard Seed. There is a wildness to the kingdom of God. It's a weed but its puff balls are marvels of natural beauty and engineering. Its puff ball seeds are borne on the wind but its roots are deep. Efforts to root it out only make it spread all the more. One might well plant a garden of dandelions in a carefully contained rectangular plot, but the cup will soon run over, spilling the kingdom crop in all directions.

There's more to know about the plants we call 'weeds' too of course. Biologists call them 'pioneers.' Wherever there is open soil the pioneers are the first to grow. Their evolutionary purpose is healing. They rush in to cover open soil because that is where the land is wounded, so to speak, bleeding nutrients on the wind and the rain.

When we add to that the medicinal qualities of many weeds, there appear to be more and more reasons for us to cultivate this weed that is the kingdom. Pliny the Elder wanted us all to know that the mustard plant, wild weed though it may be, is "extremely beneficial for the health." Perhaps we should stop fighting it, stop

trying to root it out, and welcome it in. Maybe we need to make the journey from hostility to hospitality, from opposition to tolerance to loving acceptance. Perhaps we should be working *with* the incredible vitality and life force of this weed, this kingdom, this greatest of all shrubs. *Perhaps* God's plan and Her work is wider and more loving than we thought. *Perhaps* there is a wider range of plants in God's garden. Maybe we should be work on loving and accepting them all, rather than labelling some of them as weeds. Something to think about.