

## Contexts

### Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

### Mark 4:26-34 – things to notice

- Two parables about the Kingdom of God: Parable about the Growing Seed & parable about the Mustard Seed
- Only Mark has the first parable about the Kingdom.
- 'Kingdom of God' – better described as the 'reign of God's grace'. It is not a place, but God's (often mysterious) action in the world and in human beings.
- First parable emphasises the 'mysterious' nature of God's reign which may grow and develop unobserved – but grow it does and achieves its purposes – a harvest providing food.
- Second parable centres on the comparison between small seeds and big shrubs. 'From little things, big things grow' (!)
- Note that when taken together, the Kingdom of God provides for two basic human needs – food and shelter. This seems to tie in with the 'harvest of good works' idea which is produced by those who hear and do the word of God.
- Jesus uses parables to speak to the people, but explains everything to the disciples when they are alone.

### The 'Parable' context

- From the Greek meaning to place things side by side for the sake of comparison.
- A technical term for a figure of speech in ancient oratory.
- Use of simile - one thing compared to another of a different kind and the similarity is expressed by 'like' or 'as' (eg "like lambs among wolves").
- Use of metaphor – the qualities of one thing are directly ascribed to another (eg "You are salt of the earth").
- Characteristics of Jesus' parables: always realistic images drawn from daily life BUT the realism is shattered and the listener is left wondering.
- Use of hyperbolic and paradoxical language
- Open-ended invitations waiting for a response.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for the 11th Sunday ?

The first reading from the prophet Ezekiel sets the scene for Jesus' teaching in the Gospel. Ezekiel talks about a time when God will take a small shoot from the top of a tree and plant it on the mountain of Israel. This small shoot will grow into a great tree which will provide shelter, shade and food. It will be bigger than all the other trees and all-embracing. In this text the small shoot represents a future king from the house of David. The imagery suggests that Israel will become a great nation, but note that the imagery is about shelter, shade and food, not about military might, etc. Alternatively, it could suggest that this future king will himself embody God's heart in providing for the people of Israel rather than making war. Perhaps it is another reference to God as shepherd-king not warrior-king?

We return to Ordinary Time in the Church's year this Sunday with two parables about the Kingdom of God.

Parables are meant to leave the hearers wondering. They are not straight-forward answers to questions. They are food for thought.

In the Gospels Jesus is rarely concerned about facts and figures, dates and times. By using parables Jesus is trying to engage his listeners at a deeper level. He wants his teaching to seize their hearts. He wants them to discover the truth of what he is saying for themselves. It is part of the business of conversion - coming to see with new eyes.

It is wonderful to see Jesus, again and again, looking at life and at what's happening around him, for things and images that might help the people to detect and to experience the presence of the Kingdom.

In Mark's Gospel the Kingdom is not something yet to come, it is a present reality. It is the presence and action (reign) of God among his people. That may not always be readily seen, but it is there none the less. It may seem to have humble beginnings (like the small seed in the second parable), but the experience of it grows into something all-consuming.

### **The story of the seed that grows all on its own**

The farmer who plants the seed knows the process: first the seed, then the green shoot, the leaf, the ear and the grain. The farmer knows how to wait and will not cut the stalk before it is time, but he does not know from where the power comes for the soil, the rain, the sun and the seed to make a seed turn into fruit. That's what the Kingdom of God is like. It's a process. There are stages and points of growth. It takes time and happens in time. The fruit comes at the right time but no one can explain its mysterious power.

### **The story of the tiny mustard seed that turns into something very big**

The mustard seed is small, but it grows, to the point where the birds can make their nests in its branches. That's what the Kingdom is like. It begins as something very small, it grows and spreads its branches providing shelter and shade where new life grows. *(From Lectio Divina June 2021 – ocarm.org)*

Thinking about the Kingdom today sets a context for our continued listening to Mark's Gospel and a reminder that God is at work in the world.

Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom is central and fundamental – the work of uncovering the often-hidden reign of God and returning humanity to God's original plan for his family.

