

The Kingdom: growth and resistance (Mark 4: 1-34)

The Parable of the Sower

4 Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. ² He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' ⁹ And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

The Purpose of the Parables

10 When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹² in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." '

13 And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²⁰ And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

A Lamp under a Bushel Basket

21 He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? ²² For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. ²³ Let anyone

with ears to hear listen!’²⁴ And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.²⁵ For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’

The Parable of the Growing Seed

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.’

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

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.’

The Use of Parables

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.

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Having declared messianic war on the Strong Man and his house (3:27) Jesus moves to dispel any notion that the transformation of this world into the Kingdom of God will come about through violent revolution. The Kingdom will emerge and spread slowly; is like a seed that is sown and grows, rather than an overnight regime change. Jesus also addresses the issue of resistance to the Kingdom: after all, if it is such obviously Good News, why the widespread and deep-seated resistance that they are encountering, and which will ultimately result in the cross? He does both through a series of parables, in what will become his distinctive teaching method. This is Jesus' first sermon, following on from what can be viewed as the "opening skirmishes" in chapters 1-3.

Growth, not revolution

The three parables of growing seeds (the sower, the growing seed and the mustard seed) are agricultural images of growth, rather than military images of revolutionary liberation. This is hugely significant if we remember that the most likely backdrop to the gospel is the Great Revolt - the Jewish uprising against Roman occupation (66-73 CE). Assuming, with Ched Myers, that Mark is writing fairly immediately before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (ie writing 68/9 CE), Mark urges his church to remember that Jesus fiercely resisted defining his messiahship in terms of a military insurgent, and the fulfilment of his Kingdom vision through a successful uprising to throw off the Roman yoke. Not only did Jesus have to contend very actively against this sort of populist expectation in his own ministry (hence Mark's emphasis on the "Messianic Secret"), but Mark's own church members were probably being actively recruited by the Jewish rebel leaders into a war that the rebels viewed as a Jihad - the final messianic war that would usher in the Kingdom.

That Jesus is consciously and explicitly engaged in a revolution should not be doubted. He is God's one-man liberation army, sent to overthrow a world order defined by Rome and underpinned by the economic, political, military and religious systems that guaranteed the status quo. Furthermore, Jesus sees this a struggle with cosmic dimensions: all the systems of domination that function to benefit the few at the expense of the many can never transform this world into the place God intended it to be at creation. Rather, they only perpetuate the cycle that ultimately engulfs the whole of creation and humankind in death, despair and futility. This is because Pharaoh, Babylon and Rome are the visible manifestations of the Strong Man - Satan - who is at the heart of all forms of resistance to the Kingdom of God. And Jesus has declared unequivocal war on the Strong Man (3:27).

What each of the parables emphasises is that the fate of the Kingdom does not lie in the hands of the disciples. It is not dependent on power or strategy. The disciple's only role is to sow the seed of the Word. Faithful following is about evangelism. What happens thereafter is largely in the hands of God. In the Parable of the Sower, the harvest depends on the reception of the Word, where the dominant response is hostility and resistance, as we will see.

In the Parable of the Growing Seed, the disciple is both sower and reaper, but what happens to the seed and its relationship to the harvest is entirely a matter of natural processes outside any control of the disciple. And in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the emphasis is on the disparity between the size of the seed sown and the shrub that it produces.

Revolutions that genuinely change the world

Military revolution foregrounds the role of the fighters, the cunning of the strategy, the size of the force and the disposition of the enemy. The agricultural realm, by contrast, places all the emphasis on God. The "Kings and Battles" (or even "Messianic Guerrilla") image belongs within the courts, among the geo-politics of the day, and prizes human ingenuity at developing ever more sophisticated and effective ways of killing. This is the option represented at Jesus' trial by Barabbas. The "Kingdom-as-growth" belongs in the peasant rural agricultural context - the struggle to produce "daily bread" in a subsistence economy.

What is at stake here is just how revolutionary a revolution Jesus is proclaiming - or to put the same point differently, the question being posed is why revolutions always fail to change the world in the way that they are intended and envisaged to do. Jesus and the people of his

time were no less aware than we are of the ways in which some revolutions appear to usher in a genuinely new world order, yet begin to unravel before long so that the "same old, same old" reasserts itself - albeit with slightly different contours.

Jesus seems to take the view that everything depends on the nature of the revolution. God's way of working is not dependent on "shock and awe" - overwhelming, annihilative force. A revolution that is sown as a seed, takes root and grows to reach full fruition is genuinely transformative. This is re-creation. It harnesses the powers of creation, abundance, generosity and grace that are inherent in creation. In the biblical narrative, the first human beings are put in a garden where everything that they need grows in abundance. All they need to do is to pick the cereal crops that they need. This is God's intention for creation and the relationship between human beings and agriculture. It is only as a result of the first disobedience that the ground is cursed, and the humans are told that "daily bread" will no longer be the generous gift of God, but the hard-won struggle to wrest a living from a hostile earth (Genesis 3: 17-19).

The revolution that brings in the Kingdom is thus a process that heals the brokenness of creation and the myriad broken relationships that are based on disobedience and competition - "living at the expense of others". This is why the Kingdom cannot be brought about by revolution: that will never be revolutionary enough!

Why the resistance?

The Kingdom is the world transformed into all that God intended. It means that things cannot remain as they are. It is a new world order - a total regime change that transforms things from the inside just as much as from the outside.

That sort of transformation is unequivocally Good News only to those people who have no stake or advantage in the status quo. For those who derive their security, power and status from their place in the present order, the pressure to resist the Kingdom in all its transformative power is enormous. That is why the Kingdom creates such huge conflict - a conflict that will be played out in Jesus' own life and ministry.

Obviously, the most powerful are going to be the most resistant. These are the "principalities and powers" - the people with their hands on the levers of power. What they do not realise is that The System they create and that enslaves the weakest, the most vulnerable and the poorest, also imprisons them in chains of addiction to power, blindness to the humanity of others and armour against compassion. Ironically, the smashing of The System is the only way that they, along with the have-nots, can be liberated. Yet it is they who find it most impossible to "lose their lives in order to find them". They are Jesus' most implacable opponents. These are the "rocky ground" of the parable.

What we don't realise, though, is how susceptible the "fairly poor and marginalised" - the "barely coping" (as opposed to the poorest and most marginalised) - are to the false promises held out by the status quo ("The System"). They are bribable. They can see the possibility - however remote - of some day, some how, becoming part of the "haves". They can be co-opted into the anti-revolutionary forces. Margaret Thatcher knew this only too well: her council house sell-off was designed to co-opt instinctively Labour voters into her social revolution that undid the traditional ties that had bound British society into an interdependent whole. They are represented in the gospel narrative by the rich young man and Judas, and presumably

form the backbone of the Easter crowd that can be persuaded to change their chant from "Hosanna to the Son of David!" to "Crucify him!" They don't want a genuine revolution; they just want a share of the pie. These are the people who can embrace regime change, but only because it puts a different group in power that now includes them. They are the thorny ground of the parable.

These are the people, too, who are most vulnerable to threat and coercion. They have enough to lose that they can be threatened. Jesus will be unequivocal about the demands of discipleship at Caesarea Philippi: we cannot have the Kingdom while hanging on to any investment in the status quo. Furthermore, embracing the Way of the Cross means that The System will turn against us and move to eliminate the threat. This is the step too far for the disciples at Caesarea Philippi: they want the Kingdom without the cross. They are up for following a Jesus who will form a new government, but not one who calls them to sacrifice themselves for the sake of a future that they might not share.

A disproportionate harvest

For those with nothing to lose and everything to gain, the Kingdom is extraordinarily Good News, to be embraced with fervour. These are the good soil that produces a harvest way in excess of the seed sown. These are the mustard seeds that produce shrubs of enormous size - the people and initiatives that make a Jesus-shaped difference way out of proportion to the size of the initiative or act. That is why Jesus compares the presence of the Message (the Word) of the Kingdom as a lamp that shines a light into every heart: it exposes ruthlessly our priorities, loyalties and ties to the present, unredeemed way of living that promises us the opportunity to live at the expense of others. We ought not to underestimate the seductiveness of that temptation! Similarly, it exposes our every instinct to hear the promise

of a new world order as Good News and to reach out and embrace it with everything at our disposal.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 4: 1-34)

Mark 4: 1-34

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Copyright is the legal right in law that grants the creator of an original work exclusive right over its use and distribution. Copyright is something we as mentors have to be on top of as we create and share resources with local churches.

It would be easy to read Mark 4:34 to imply that only the disciples were privy to the true meaning of the parables. It can be interpreted as bestowing some sort of copyright on the disciples by Jesus, insofar as it seems to suggest that only the apostles (because they were instructed by Jesus) can truly understand the true meaning and correct interpretation of his teaching. It is a fact that some parts of the Christian church during some phases of its history have behaved as if a chosen few do, in reality, hold a monopoly on understanding the words and works of Jesus.

It is easy to see how this passage authenticates the disciples as the legitimate interpreters of the tradition and gently undermines other interpreters and their understanding of the parables. It says that the disciples hold the copyright for understanding the parables of Jesus.

It is very easy for church members to think that the only proper

interpretation of Scripture is the one received from the minister in the pulpit. In previous times, the minister was the person authorized to teach what Scripture says and what Jesus meant. Ministers were theologically, as well as physically (in our deliberately high pulpits), six feet above contradiction.

Times have changed, and we no longer assume that a dog collar designates some God-appointed infallibility when interpreting the parables or other Scriptures. It is the gift of the Spirit that allows us to hear and discover the voice of God. Thankfully, we have come to realize that the Holy Spirit is present with us all when we read Scripture, and the proper interpretation of the Bible is a communal task and event in which all of us (including the preacher) plays a vital role. The copyright belongs to all of us – collectively.

Questions for reflection

Consider meditating on Scripture as a way of discovering what God is saying to us.

Lectio Divina is a Latin term that means “divine reading”, and describes a particular way of reading the Bible by which we attempt to let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. A Carthusian 12th century monk called Guigo described the stages he saw as essential to the practice of *Lectio Divina*. These remain fundamental to today.

Stage 1: Lectio (reading)

We read the Word of God slowly and reflectively, allowing it to sink into us. Any biblical passage may be used, but it ought not to be too long.

Stage 2: Meditatio (reflection)

Here we think about our chosen text and ruminate on it so that we take from it what God wants to give us.

Stage 3: Oratio (response)

This is where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God. This response is inspired by our reflection on the Word of God.

Final stage: Contemplatio (rest)

Here we let go of our holy words and thoughts, as well as our own ideas, plans and meditations. We simply rest in the Word of God. We listen at the deepest level of our being to God, who speaks within us through a still, small voice. As we listen, we are transformed gradually from within. This transformation will have a profound effect on the way we actually live. The way we actually live is the test of the authenticity of our prayer. We need to take what we read in the Word of God into the rest of our daily living.

All age worship ideas Mark 4: 1-34

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Mark 4.1-34 – The parable of the sower

Thoughts - The Kingdom of God is reckless in the pursuit of the harvest. The sower sows his seeds but potentially three-quarters of the seed doesn't produce the harvest – it is dried, trampled, eaten and choked. However the harvest that is produced outweighs all the setbacks. The

task is worth it for the results that come. The lesson here is not that we sow only on good soil but that in pursuit of the kingdom of Jesus we sow as recklessly as he does. Grace defies the existing cultures of the world and connects the least, the last, the lost with the God who reaches out in Christ.

An invitation needs to be offered and accepted if it is to have any value. If we were inviting to a party we might make a list of guests – probably not everyone would come. Some might say they will but then be a no show. The invitation of the gospel reminds us that God seeks a relationship with people – he is reckless in his pursuit of them, even to the extent that he would give up heaven to pursue. If Jesus is the embodiment of God’s recklessness then what might that mean for those who follow him? If we have accepted Jesus, the living word, then the parable suggests the harvest starts with us. Unless that is we have allowed the presence of Jesus in our lives to be dried up, trampled on, chewed up or choked.

Prayer Idea

4 stations –

1. A sand pit, perhaps with drift wood and an animal skull if you can get hold of one. Invite people to reflect on the things that can dry up or snatch away faith. Anger, bereavement, disappointment, distraction, betrayal or unforgiveness. Think personally then more widely about how we can invite God to take on or stand with us in those difficult moments.
2. Images of multinational companies, of forest clearances, plastic strewn beaches, tsunami affected lands, landscapes changed through excessive industry, displaced peoples – profit and success at all costs has become the ultimate goal. The earth suffers and with it the most vulnerable inhabitants. Pray for fairer systems and cultures that cultivate the value of all people over profit. Seek God’s wisdom for how the church can respond

through political and prophetic influence.

3. A game show sign like 'The Price is right'. Money bags with dollar, euro and pound signs. A collage of magazine adverts of all the things that will make our life better and more fulfilled. Perhaps have a TV with rolling adverts of extravagant things.

Churches often ask how do we compete with the temptations of the day. Two areas you could focus on are first the issue of comparison – how we look, what we have or don't have, how we measure up in relation to... is all a disease of the modern age. Perhaps have a mirror with the words of Psalm 139.14 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made' invite people to look into the mirror and as they do to open their minds to seeing themselves as God sees them – loved, unique and free from comparison

Second is how to think of how we might live more simply and what that means in a technological age. Rather than thinking about how much can I get consider how much you can give be that as an individual or a church...reflect on a culture that seeks to bless rather than gain.

4. A sign 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like...', a tray filled with soil or compost and some small squares of paper and pencils. The harvest begins with us. Think about someone God might be encouraging you to share your story of faith with or support in a practical way. Think of ways your church could be a blessing to the community you serve. Write those things on the paper, roll it up and plant them in the soil as a mark of your commitment to the harvest offering

Practical application - The season of epiphany is one of bearing gifts. A responsive activity particularly with young people could be to have plant

pots soil and bulbs ready – tulips, daffodils or hyacinths. Invite people to pot and plant the bulbs then make decorative banners round the pots with the words from Psalm 139 as above or another verse of encouragement then encourage the congregation to give the pots away to people who may be lonely, isolated or finding life a struggle. Pop in a card with watering instructions and a message to say that this is a gift from a church that cares.

Mark 4.30-33 – The Mustard Seed

Thoughts - The kingdom of God exceeds our expectations and challenges our exclusivism is the general gist of this wonderful little parable. There is no such thing as a mustard tree normally you can get a substantial bush but something so big that the birds of the air can come and make their home in its branches defies expectation. The kingdom goes over and beyond what we imagine. This is such an encouragement when we live in an age of reason and resignation to a limited perspective. With God all things are possible, systems can be changed, powers quashed, corruption thwarted and poverty turned on its head. The birds were not a good image for any Jewish hearers because this meant that the unwelcome were not only invited but could make their home in the new order. The media and blinkered people like to use examples of terrorism and social unrest to suggest we should not show welcome or hospitality to those who seek asylum and refuge. As disciples of Jesus it is our calling to stand against this cultural shift and present a kingdom that goes to excess in order to make provision for such people.

Practical illustration and application - Have a large map or one on screen if you have projection. Invite people to identify places where refugees and asylum seekers flee from. Then invite them to think about where they travel to and settle. Less than one quarter of a % of refugees live in the UK despite the assertions of some tabloids yet we remain one

of the world's wealthiest and well-resourced nations. Other facts and figures can be found at <http://www.redcross.org.uk/What-we-do/Refugee-support/Refugee-facts-and-figures>

Invite someone who works locally with refugees and asylum seekers to come and speak to your church. Perhaps someone who has experience of the Syrian children relocation programme. Here is a link to a story of a UK couple who have fostered unaccompanied minors <https://www.homeforgood.org.uk/get-involved/responding-refugee-crisis/graham-and-sarah-fostering-unaccompanied-minors>

If you have a project near you or you have refugees in your congregation you might have a sensitive conversation to think about ways of supporting. Perhaps a care package system whereby each month you have a collection of appropriate items that can be taken to an organisation or distributed locally.

The films Paddington and Paddington 2 have some great clips/material for helping younger people, and older people, to think about the plight of refugees and asylum seekers.

Liturgies and hymns Mark 4: 1-34

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

MARK 4: 1-34

Opening Prayer

(inspired by 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Mark 4:26-34)

Holy One:

you anoint us with living water,

so we may go to serve the world

in these troubled days.
You open our eyes
so we will see everyone
as our sisters and brothers.

Seed Planter:
you place faith
deep within us,
so we can bear witness
to your just and loving kingdom.
Your love regulates our hearts,
so we can welcome all
in your name.

Gentle Spirit:
when we cannot see the way,
you take us by the hand
so we can step forward,
in faith,
into the kingdom.
You fill us with hope,
so we can sing God's joy
all of our days.

God in Community, Holy in One,
hear us as we pray as Jesus has taught us,
Our Father...

— written by Thom Shuman, and posted on **Lectionary
Liturgies**. <http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com/>

Offertory Prayer

(inspired by Mark 4:26-34)

May the offerings brought this day be used as seeds,
planted faithfully and nurtured lovingly
so that God's way may be realized anew in this world.
Grant us the humility we need to plant and then tend your precious
garden. **Amen.**

— written by Katherine Hawker, and posted on **Liturgy
Outside**. <http://liturgyoutside.net/>

Prayer: Fruit of the Kingdom

Here's a prayer from Christian Aid based on Mark 4:28.

*'The earth produces the crops on its own.
First a leaf blade pushes through,
then the heads of wheat are formed,
and finally the grain ripens.'* Mark 4:28

Father, how can we ever understand the miracle of your ways?
We see your creation and we know you are God.
Yet we saw your mighty kingdom formed with the humility of a servant.

Faith and acts of kindness grow into great good.
We will never comprehend how your kingdom comes,
but we recognise its fruit.
We see it in unexpected places: in sickness, in poverty, in conflict.
We see it the places we wouldn't want to live.

Sometimes we see it in our own lives.

Your kingdom come, Lord – in us and in your world.

— posted on the Monthly Prayers page of the **Christian Aid** website. <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

Prayers of Intercession

For all the blessings of this life,
we give thanks to You, Creator God.

For families, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and strangers,
who nurture us, that the love of God may grow within.

That Your love, your Word, like a seed,
may grow to produce in us, good fruit.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For the leaders of various nations and cities,
that they may lead with strong hearts and gentle hands and generous
spirits,
with compassion and mercy, with wisdom and grace.
May they reflect your will guiding all their actions and decisions.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who serve in harms way,
those who live in dangerous places,
those who live in areas of war and strife,
those who live in fear,
those who worry about employment, bills, food,
and struggle just to find dignity in life.

May your grace bring peace and safety to all people, one to another.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who suffer from any illness or dis-ease—
of mind, body, or spirit.

Restore these, and all those we carry in our hearts, to fullness of
health—

health as only you, O God, can bring.

May your mercy shower each of us with healing mercy and love.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who are dying, and for those who have died.

Send forth your comforting love.

Give solace to those who mourn.

Console those who grieve.

May your grace surround us
like a mantle upon our heads,
a shawl upon our shoulders,
a hand, to hold our hand.

May your love, be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

Amen

— written by Terri and posted

on **RevGalBlogPals**. <http://revgalblogpals.blogspot.ca/>

Hymns

For the Fruits of all Creation- R&S 42

There's a spirit in the air R&S 329

Will you come and follow me R&S 558

Come ye thankful people come R&S 40