

This is a familiar parable about the mustard seed
Tiniest of all seeds becomes a large tree
Great power in the tiny seed to produce something mighty

[Kingdom of God (Mark and Luke) or the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew) are interchangeable]
The Kingdom of God starts small, but has great power within it to become mighty

BUT—to limit it to that explanation misses some of the nuances of this parable
Which would have been evident to those hearing Jesus tell this parable
Actually, the parable doesn't make sense!
It is a laughable, nonsensical description of the Kingdom of God when taken at face value

Mustard was a common plant in the Middle East—it grew and spread very quickly, even out of control
But there are 2 problems with this parable...
1. Where it is planted and 2. The tree
Mark says the seed was planted in the ground
Matthew says it was planted in the field and Luke says it was planted in a garden

There were rules about where certain things could be planted
The mustard seeds could not be planted in a Jewish garden

Once mustard got started, it was hard to get rid of it because the seeds germinated easily
The plant would grow and spread quickly until it was out of control—taking over the garden

Small, controlled amounts of mustard could be planted in a large field where there was room...
But garden plots by nature were too small for what amounted to a weed
And if it grew to the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree—it isn't small and controlled

Jewish Rabbis often had discussions about "diverse kinds"—
Mustard seeds were common to those discussions about "diverse kinds"

Rules about diverse kinds were important as they brought order to a disorderly world
The creation of order in the world was important as it separated secular and sacred
Order represents holiness and established boundaries—creating pure spaces within
It was important to keep things separate and in their proper place

Where things could be planted was important as it established purity boundaries
Separation in garden plots, maintained order and kept things in their proper places
Mustard, however, would take over and cross the boundaries
It ultimately mixed in with other plants and created an unclean garden

But Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi and would have been familiar with the rules about mustard seed
So, what is he saying here?

That the Kingdom of God is like planting a mustard seed in a garden
Which you would never do because it messes things up
It wrecks the purity boundaries and is a metaphor of impurity—it is unclean
The Kingdom of God is impure? Unclean? What?

Second problem—Jesus says the mustard seed grows into a tree and the birds make nests in the tree
But—the mustard plant is a big shrub of unwieldy proportions—not a tree
So why would Jesus say it grew into a tree?
If it was a common plant, then Jesus would have been familiar with it as would the people

Tree with birds that make nests in its branches—reminiscent of the cedar in the Old Testament

Thus says the Lord GOD:

I myself will take a sprig

from the lofty top of a cedar;

I will set it out...

I myself will plant it...

*in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.*

Under it every kind of bird will live

In the shade of its branches will nest

Winged creatures of every kind.

Ezekiel 17:22–23 NRSV

One would expect the Kingdom of God to be likened to the mighty Cedars of Lebanon
But this bush that grows wild and crazy and takes over the garden?
And the parable's reference to birds making nests is like the mighty Cedar
Why a parable of a mustard seed, with references more appropriate for a Cedar of Lebanon?

Because a shrub is an inappropriate metaphor for the final state of the kingdom

A tree is more fitting

It sets up the conflict between what is and what is anticipated

It only heightens the difference between the small seed and the mature plant

This parable has humor in it—laughable and unreal story of a mustard tree in a garden!!

The growth of any seed to a mature plant is amazing

But Jesus' story is one of miraculous and impossible proportions—mustard tree!!

It may start out small—but in the end it would look like you expect it to look

The Kingdom of God did start small—Jesus and then his disciples

But the Kingdom of God doesn't look anything like anyone expects

It is both entirely different in nature and greater in scope than would be natural

It is not an earthly kingdom which sets Israel free to rule with their own king

It is an upside-down Kingdom across time, around the world, beyond time

The birds of the air settle in the branches of the mustard tree

The birds of the air represent the Gentiles coming and finding shelter

It is a hint of the coming Gentiles, welcomed into the early church as we see in Acts

But most disturbing is the fact that no one could or would plant a mustard seed in a garden

It was an unclean and unholy thing to break the purity laws and mess up the garden

It didn't even make sense from a practical point of view in that it would take over the garden

The planting is scandalous

But was Jesus not scandalous throughout his ministry? Woman at the well—touching the leper
Letting the woman of ill repute anoint him—Woman caught in adultery—tax collector
And his stories were no different—the Good Samaritan—the wheat and the tares—the banquet

There is this radical theme of inclusion throughout the gospels—everyone is welcome
Obvious theme in this parable—but we've mostly missed it
We've been more pharisaical than Christian—keeping to a sense of separation, purity

The Kingdom of God is open to absolutely everyone—it is messy and unwieldy, but alive
Babies have dirty diapers—people come to Jesus as they are—not all cleaned up and good
Truth is, the church was never meant to be proper and tidy
All are welcome here as we look for ways to be faithful to Jesus' call to live the Kingdom
Yes, our garden won't necessarily have neat rows of like things looking pretty
But we care more about following Jesus than about looking good

Quakers have long said there is no separation between sacred and secular
"Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean." Acts 10:15 GNB
Words to Peter before he went to the house of Cornelius, a gentile God fearer

The Kingdom of God is amazing—it starts small and grows out of control
It is tenacious and never gives up
Even when eradicated Christianity has persisted
It is inclusive and messy
It grows beyond expectation to a thing of God's creation

Let us enter the Kingdom and let it be as radical and scandalous as it intends to be

Main source of material for this message:

Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus by Bernard Brandon Scott, Fortress Press, chapter 19 *The Mustard Tree*, pages 373-387.

The Radical Stories of Jesus: Interpreting the Parables Today by Michael Ball, Regent's Park College, pages 113-117.