



## **Matthew 13:31–33**

31 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” 33 He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a wom-

an took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

## **Reflection**

(Today’s talk is given by Craig Tubman.)

The Australian singer-songwriter Paul Kelly, once wrote ‘from little things big things grow.’ This could be a pretty good working title for Jesus’ two stories today.

Jesus has been telling parables in chapter 13 to challenge people to respond rightly to his words, to accept the invitation into the kingdom of heaven that he is offering and in doing so avoid the coming judgment.

However, here in verse 31 he takes a little

detour to give us an important insight into the dynamics of the kingdom of heaven. As is often the case with Jesus, what he reveals is not what we (and certainly the first hearers) would have expected. When God's kingdom breaks into this world it will start small, like the size of a mustard seed. But given time, this little seed, this humble beginning will encompass the whole world.

I take it Jesus told these parables so that we wouldn't get caught off guard by the seemingly unimpressive nature of God's kingdom in this world. Of course, so far Matthew has recorded Jesus doing things that are anything but unimpressive, as he heals and teaches and does things that are drawing crowds of followers, causing great unrest amongst the religious lead-

ers. But if God's kingdom is the calling of a new people drawn together under the headship of Christ, to grow in love for him and each other, then the church that Jesus was to form looked very unimpressive.

In Jesus' day, kingdoms looked like the Roman Empire. They didn't look like upper room gatherings of fisherman, tax collectors, prostitutes and merchants. Kingdoms had colosseums, Caesars, temples, games, armies, victories, aqueducts and globalisation. That's what Rome was about and if Jesus was claiming to bring in the kingdom of God then surely it would be bigger than the kingdom of Rome. More impressive, more dominant, more opulent.

This is not the way it works says Jesus. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed –

although it is the smallest seed, when it grows it will become the largest of garden plants.

It's hard to fully grasp but the truth is that 300 years after Jesus resurrection, his church became the most dominant, and the official religion of the entire Roman Empire. And here's the thing, this did not happen because the early Christians set goals and crafted plans to take over Rome. They didn't have 100 year vision statements to one day rule the world. From what we can gather they had no plans to become the official religion of Rome. The only thing they really focussed on was being a community of men, woman and children that took Jesus and his kingdom seriously and they had an open door policy which invited others to join.

Rodney Stark wrote a book on how Christian faith grew so quickly and became so dominant. In one of his conclusions he writes,

‘Perhaps above all else, Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death.’

He noted that Christianity brought this new conception of humanity by living out in community its love for the poor, its disdain for social standing, its liberating view of woman as equals and its sharing of faith with those interested.

But of course God’s kingdom did not come to fruition in 312AD. It still grows today. But

we do see from the early beginnings and through the span of history that the growth and influence of Jesus church has always been most profound whenever it was influencing the world from the edges, as a mustard seed growing, inviting others to watch and see how good God has been and continues to be, rather than trying to take control and run its own earthly kingdom.

Jesus second parable is conceptually very similar to his first. A small amount of yeast mixed into a large amount of flour will have a significant impact on the whole batch. This again is Jesus setting our expectations about the kingdom of heaven. This parable could be a reference to Jesus' church shaping the world around them or a reference in fact to himself changing the

whole religious landscape. Indeed Jesus shifted the whole conversation of religion from how we reach God to how God has reached us! Either way from little things, big things grow.

I think these parables are paramount for us to understand in today's fast paced, edgy, consumerist culture. We love words like radical, epic, ultimate, extreme, innovative, dynamic. We yearn for the next big thing, the next explosive breakthrough. In his book *Ordinary*, Michael Horton writes,

'To grab and hold our attention, everything has to have an exclamation point. We've become accustomed to looking around restlessly for something new, the latest and greatest, the idea or product or person or experience that will solve our prob-



lems, give us some purpose and change the world. Although we might be a little jaded by the ads, we're eager to take whatever it is "to a whole new level".

If Jesus' words about the kingdom of heaven are true, and I believe they are, then we must be wary of bringing this next big thing mentality into church. For God's kingdom is a mustard seed that over time grows to find fruition in something ultimate. Whilst it can have huge impacts on personal lives and communities, it is also a slow burn that grows as we seek to honour Jesus most often in the ordinary. As we seek to forgive those who have wronged us, be generous in our time with others, commit to meeting regularly with our church, seek homes that are welcoming, words that are edifying and being always ready to share the

good news that Jesus brings with others.

We look forward to Jesus' return when this creation will be redeemed, and the tree will reach its full height. Growth in our own faith and our church may not always be linear and upward. But if God is the one who finishes what he starts, then the only reasonable conclusion is to be part of the garden that he is tending. He is the promise-maker and promise-keeper, even when we stumble. From little things, big things grow.

## **Think**

Take some time today to consider your own journey of faith. Are you seeking the next best spiritual experience, desperately hoping it will change everything for you

or are you settling in for a life long journey that may not look impressive but has great depth?

Consider the place in which God currently has you. How can you honour him in your home, your workplace, your family, your church? Often the greatest moments of spirit-filled living do not take place in front of thousands of people or on Facebook, they don't even change the whole world. Instead they are daily lives, shaped by Jesus – embracing his forgiveness, following his word and seeking joy in his Kingdom.

## **Pray**

Spend some time in prayer asking for wisdom and trust to live the long journey of faith. Give thanks for the good promises

God has given you and ask him to help you set your heart and mind on Christ and not simply the next best thing.