

## It's Like What?

As a group we Christians spend a lot of time with articles, books, on-line blogs and even TV shows and movies which contain descriptions portraying the kingdom of God. Our passage from the gospel of Mark comes from the fourth chapter which is one of the few places in Mark where he writes about what Jesus taught. In general Mark is more concerned with relating Jesus' actions—with whom Jesus spent his time and what happened. Mark does tell us that Jesus taught those who came to him many things. However, except for these few instances these teachings are not recorded by Mark. So what did Jesus teach that Mark who focused on actions found important enough to include in what he reported about Jesus' life. The text I read contains two parables, both of which relate information about the Kingdom of God. At least in almost every modern English version of Mark that is the translation for the topic which is being compared in the parable. Yet an older translation—called Young's literal translation uses another equally valid meaning for the Greek word βασιλεία. In addition to meaning a place or territory belonging to a king, the word can just as easily refer to the rule or reign of a king. In the sense that we often interpret kingdom in the parables of Jesus we make the association of kingdom with heaven. This then we picture is how life will be there when God's kingdom is fully present. But the constant refrain in Mark was that in Jesus the kingdom of God had come near. If the kingdom was near, was that just because Jesus was walking among them? Or are we being told something about the reign of God in this world in all times and places? If the message is about how God is present in this world—what do the parables then tell us? In fact as part of our understanding of any of Jesus' teachings given as parables we need to consider the nature of parables. Despite the way that we read them parables were not meant to be understood as allegories or fables which fully explained something. Most of the parables are so familiar to us that we see them in the light of stories—usually stories with a moral lesson. This way of interpreting the parables is sometimes made easier because Jesus will assign roles to those in the parables. But to the listeners who first heard them they were usually disturbing because they represented a challenge to the commonly accepted cultural norm. To those listeners there was something that didn't fit the expected. Parables by their nature take a known situation and place it along side something else which creates a problematic meeting of the two cases. Something about the situation described doesn't make sense in the context it is given. The two situations will never exactly overlap no matter how you try to make one to one connections in the interpretation. This effort will cause you to look at the parable differently and indeed can cause you to have a different understanding about the kingdom of God. Allegories and fables seek to explain things. Parables are meant to be disruptive so that you re-evaluate what you thought you knew—and often to confront you with a truth which is surprising and perhaps a truth that makes you uncomfortable. The first parable we find in this text compares the kingdom or reign of God to someone scattering seed on the ground and then leaving it untended until it is ready to be harvested. So is this parable about the farmer or the seed? This first parable might be about the wonder of faith that sees the results of God's movement in the world without participating in it. Or it might be about our complete inability to control the coming kingdom of God; our inability to dictate what happens. This second aspect of the parable leaves us uncomfortable because it leaves us vulnerable.

God's reign comes apart from our efforts, it cannot be controlled or influenced, and can only be received as a gift. In this parable the farmer who harvests appears clueless about how the seed came to grow and produce the grain he harvested. Our first instinct is to assign the role of farmer to God, which works if you move directly to the harvest without considering that middle section. If you consider the middle part where the farmer does not know or understand how the seed grows that does not seem to apply to God. If the seed is faith, which is indeed a gift planted by God, what Jesus may be telling us in this parable is that our faith is a mystery over which we have no control. God's reign within us grows and matures because of God's activity; not ours. The one who scatters the seed within the parable may not be the one who harvests the grain for we are the ones who harvest the grain of faith. In this view, the seed, kingdom-faith is something that comes from the outside and grabs hold of you—whether you like it or not. If we take this view we might be tempted to wash our hands of the world. After all, God is in control. But part of the mystery of the growth of faith may be that God is working in places where the seed needs to be nourished and although the work is God's activity, we may participate in God's work by sharing the faith we hold. Could this parable be telling us that we have a role of sowing seeds? The faith that allows us to see God's activity and to present that perception of God's reign to others as the gift it is. In this view, the growing and maturing of the seed is God's work. We are clueless about how that happens for the process unfolds in God's time and in God's way. And in the way of parables, all these things may be true. The second parable in this text is one that is very familiar to us. I imagine that many of us ladies have or have had a necklace that was given to us because of this parable. I know that my grandmother gave me a necklace with a mustard seed encased in it at the time I joined the church. As children, many of us have heard a children's sermon which featured mustard seeds which demonstrated just how very small they are without the magnification of a piece of glass surrounding them. In this parable the association with faith has become so dominant that we insert faith into the parable almost without thinking. But the parable begins the "kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth." The text goes on to state how this tiny seed produces a shrub which is large enough to shelter birds who can build nests in its branches. We take this and say "have a little faith" to someone facing a difficult situation. Or we point out that if you have faith great things can grow out of small steps. Or we say don't be discouraged if you don't see how your efforts can change things because God can use them to do great things. These are important aspects of faith. It is true that sometimes very large things have small beginnings and faith often plays a role. There are plenty of examples of this to be found. But in this view where is the disturbing element of the parable? The disturbing element is not obvious to us because we are so far removed from the agricultural society of those who heard the parable. The idea that a mustard seed would be sown would have been totally shocking to them. We know mustard as a herb with medicinal properties and one that is useful in flavoring and preserving food. But the mustard shrub is a garden pest which no one would have sown on purpose. It grows so readily on its own that once it appears it will take over a field. In truth, the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds and does not grow into the largest of all shrubs. To the listeners of Jesus this comparison would have been based on an absurdity followed by exaggerations. What about God's reign would have been "sorta like" the mustard seed? To the hearers of Mark's

gospel this true character of the mustard seed would have seemed like good news. The almost predatory ability of the mustard plant to take over would have been seen as the ability of God to take over the planned crop of the Romans. The sheltering of birds in its branches would have been seen as providing places for birds who would then consume more of the carefully planted seeds of the Roman imperial agenda. Good news! God's power has many ways to carry the day over powers bent on their own profit and power. So if we associate the reign of God with this type of plant, a plant which invades the established way of society, perhaps more like an image of Kudzu—what does that mean for us. One thing which might emerge is that God's rule is invasive...it will come. Again, it is something that we cannot control. If we are content with the way things are—that may not be good news. Because it means that the reign of God comes to overturn, to take over, to transform the kingdoms of this world. But if we are not satisfied with the world as it is, if we can envision something more than the status quo of our world where scarcity and fear and limited justice and all things associated with worldly rule, then maybe Jesus is telling us that God's rule is infiltrating this world and its systems. These parables may be a word of hope. This word of hope that things will not remain as they are can be a word that will entice, prod or poke us into working toward the vision of the rule of God which Jesus proclaims where caring for one another is the rule, not the exception; where everyone's welfare is a matter of concern and all are our neighbors. Hope doesn't just lift your spirits, it moves you to action. Why are these parables so important for Mark and for us? Because Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of God is coming and while we certainly cannot control or even summon it, we can actively anticipate it by looking for and even aiding its unexpected growth. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.