

## **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

### **Mark 4:30-34**

“With what can we compare the kingdom?” (v30). This is an important question because the kingdom tells you something about the King. This is true at every level of life from gardeners to managers to CEOs to presidents (Prov. 24:30-34). The state of things speaks about those responsible for it. Jesus has announced the kingdom of God is here (1:15). He has told the disciples he will make them fishers of men (1:17). So what does this mean? How will the kingdom make its way? What sorts of people will be included? Jesus asks this question because he wants to see what the disciples, and you, think, and then to compare it to what he says. This passage echoes the question asked in Isaiah 40, one of the most famous chapters in the Old Testament: “To what will you liken God, or what likeness compare to him?” (v18). He is not to be reckoned as an idol we make or control.

### **Smallest Seed, Largest Plant**

The kingdom is the thing sown. It's the smallest of the seeds that are sown in a garden (Lk. 13:19). The size of the mustard seed was proverbial (cf. Matt. 17:20). Jesus and his followers weren't much to look at, and he *had* to announce the kingdom or else no one would have known it arrived (1:15). The kingdom isn't invisible, but you have to know what to look for if you're going to see it. It's visible, just small, a “little flock” (Lk. 12:32). But this would not always be the case. Eventually it grows up to be the biggest of the garden plants (v32). Matthew and Luke call it a tree (13:32; 13:19). The contrast is the hiddenness of the plant at the beginning and the flourished success at its fruition. Pliny the elder says “Mustard . . . with its pungent taste and fiery effect . . . grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once” (Natural History 19.170-71). You can't see it and then it dominates. The kingdom is an idea, a promise, a declaration, a tiny band, and then it makes its way up, soon to be inhabited.

### **The Birds Nesting**

When the tree gets visible and puts out branches, the birds come (v32). Jesus is picking up on the Old Testament image of people of many nations finding rest in one tree (Ez. 17:22-24; 31:6; Dan. 4:12, 21). The kingdom is not just big, it's international. William Hendriksen said, “Within forty years of Christ's death the gospel had reached all the great cultural centers of the Roman world, and ever so many out-of-the-way places besides.” The tree began in Jerusalem but quickly went out to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). We ought to know we're part of a tree that goes back to Jesus (and Abraham), and not to the 1990s, 1700s, or 1517.

### **The Mustard Tree Kingdom is...**

**Catholic** – From all people, all races, all times. All Christian churches are a part of it.

**Organic** – The tree is growing. We know it's also being pruned (Jn. 15:5-6; Rom. 11:17-21). But there are no snipers hiding in the bushes to take out questionable birds.

**Visible** – What the disciples took on faith, we partly get to enjoy by sight. And yet we share the same mission to reach our people the way they did theirs. We're not a weed nor a chia pet, grown overnight, but we want to be a blessing to people here in this community.

## NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

### **Today's Passage: Mark 4:30-34**

*30 And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." 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 without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.*

### **Questions**

1. How big is the mustard seed compared to others?
2. What is unique about the mustard plant once it is grown up?
3. The Old Testament compares people from different countries to birds, so when Jesus says the kingdom grows big so birds come nest in its shade, he is talking about all different kinds of people from all over the world trusting in him. How many countries can you name? Do you know Christians whose families have lived in different countries?
4. Draw a picture of a big mustard tree with birds nesting in it.

### **Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:**

...when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

-Mark 4:32