

For us today, this is a harvest of the salvation of souls. We tend to be very concerned about the church and its growth, or lack of it, and this parable is a reminder of God's authority to grow His Kingdom as He sees fit. Our responsibility to be ready to act.

### ***The mustard seed.***

Jesus spoke lastly about a mustard seed and its growth into a large tree. The story picks up on the similar themes of growth found in most of this group of parables, but here the emphasis is on the size of the growth. Even in Jesus' day, the seed of what was called a 'mustard shrub' was proverbially regarded as 'the smallest seed', and the plant did grow to around 12 to 14 feet in height, sufficient to provide shade and be a place for birds to gather. The message is straightforward. The growth of the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus would be far greater than could be imagined. In human terms, Jesus could start with no smaller 'seed' for the Kingdom than a small group of followers called disciples, but this would be enough for God to change the whole world! We can say this in retrospect, but Jesus wanted his listeners, notably the disciples, to realise that they were involved with something which was far bigger than their expectations.

There is one slightly sinister note to this parable, and it is uncertain whether Jesus intended us to draw meaning from it. Gathering birds (4:32) was regarded in Jesus' day as a rather ominous sign, probably because of the idea of carrion birds gathering around dead carrion. Some believe this reference to the birds is a small reminder to us that the coming of the Kingdom will involve death. Certainly, we will not read far from here in Mark before we find that Jesus begins to teach the disciples openly about His own death and its meaning. Is this a hint of what is to come?

### **Application**

There are a number of direct challenges to God's people within these parables. The first is to place our 'light on a lamp stand! All too often, the life of God's people, the church, is like a secret within society, and we have to make sure that what we do is open and accessible. This is a challenge today, because society in most countries is made up of many different 'cultures' many of which are fairly closed themselves. Christians can help the whole structure of society by calling for openness, and we have nothing to fear from walking this path. Our faith should be an 'open secret'.

Within the second third and fourth saying of our reading, there is a strong challenge to us to have a mature understanding of God's hand on the growth of His Kingdom and indeed on history as a whole. Scripture tells us that if we begin to walk the path of faith, we will find that if we trust in God, then our faith will be increased (4:25), it will grow naturally (4:27) and will become much larger than we think (4:30f.), because that is the nature of what happens in God's Kingdom! This is what we should expect. To the first disciples, these things were new, and Jesus introduced them carefully and slowly, but for us they are treasures which explain our faith. Our privilege is to work with our Lord in His Kingdom, always ready for harvest time!

### **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. Discuss in your group which of these parables speaks most to the church today.
2. How important is growth to your understanding of the life of the church and the Kingdom of God today. Where do we see signs of growth?
3. How do we prepare for God's harvest time today, whether the harvest of souls in the present, or the harvest of the end times?

### **Discipleship**

To what extent is your life one which follows regular patterns which you do not expect to change? Is this really what God intends for you? The passages of Scripture we have read today suggests that we should be ready for more than this. Spend time reading through this passage until the Holy Spirit speaks to you about how you prepare for the harvest, for example. Be open to other guidance beyond that which is in the study today.

### **Final Prayer**

Lord God, You are in our fingers as we write, in our lips as we speak, in our hands as we work, in our eyes as we see and in our hearts as we decide what to do with each moment of a day. Bless us we pray, and lead us ever onwards to trust in You, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! AMEN

### **Prayer**

Great and powerful God, You have always known us better than we know ourselves. May we not be arrogant and act as if we know better, when You call us to do things for You which are challenging. Make our hearts submissive so that we are always prepared to listen and do what You call us to do, trusting in Your wisdom and strength: AMEN

### **Other Prayer Suggestions**

#### **Weekly Theme: Missions**

Praise God today for the many people who are saved by the grace of God and the widely differing circumstances in which this happens. Ask the Lord to increase this essential work of the Kingdom in our midst so that more may come to know the love of God and be reconciled to Him. Pray that this will happen to such an extent that the whole world is affected by revival!

### **Meditation**

Look at the people of God, don't see failure, see success!

See those who have given their lives to Jesus Christ,

And will follow Him always, whatever the cost, into eternal life!

See those who long to know more about the Bible,

And will commit to give it time if they are given the help they need.

See those who pray in praise, pray for others and pray in faith,

And will strongly support others in need, in the fellowship of prayer.

See those who stand firmly on the rock of faith received,

And will defend the truth of God's revelation through Christ alone.

See those who have their own deep experiences of faith,

And will share this testimony if given the opportunity so to do.

See those who yearn to see God's Kingdom come in power,

And will live by the advice of Scripture until Christ comes again.

Look at the people of God, and be inspired by their faith.

### **Bible Study - Mark 4:21-34**

<sup>21</sup> He said to them, 'Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a basket or a bed? Do you not place it on a stand instead?' <sup>22</sup> For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, and nothing is kept secret unless it is meant to come to light. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who has ears to hear should listen!

<sup>24</sup> He continued, 'Consider carefully what you hear. The measure you use for others will be used for you, and even more will be given you. <sup>25</sup> For to the one who has, more will be given; and from the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.'

<sup>26</sup> He also said, 'The kingdom of God is like this. When someone scatters seed on the ground <sup>27</sup> and sleeps and rises night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth creates produce all by itself; first the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.'

<sup>30</sup> Again He said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God; what parable can we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> but once it is sown it springs up and becomes the largest of all garden shrubs. It spreads out large branches so that the birds of the air make nests in its shade.'

<sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the Word to them, according to their ability to hear it; <sup>34</sup> he did not speak to them without using parables, but he explained everything to his own disciples, in private.

## Review

Our reading today is a series of four parables and sayings of Jesus placed by Mark after the parable of the sower and the explanation that follows it. As a whole, this section of Mark's Gospel gives us substantial teaching about the Kingdom of God, and offers us a flavour of the preaching of Jesus at this point in His ministry. One theme stands out within the whole section, which is that all the parables and sayings have the general theme of growing, or things used to their full potential. The light is exposed for all to see on a lamp stand (4:22), those who have will be given even more (4:24), the seed grows secretly until the excitement of the harvest (4:29), and the mustard seed grows into a useful large shrub (4:32). We are tempted to wonder whether these sayings were part of Jesus' 'stock' of preaching material, used many times when preaching about the Kingdom; but we can never know for sure!

If we look at the last two verses of our reading, Mark comments that Jesus 'spoke the Word to them, according to their ability to hear it' (4:33), and he did this by using parables in His general teaching, whilst explaining them to His disciples in private (4:33,34). This is consistent with what we have already learned about Jesus' method (see yesterday's study), and explains something of the care with which Jesus approached His task of preaching the Kingdom. The crowds may not have understood, but that does not mean that Jesus did not attempt to help them understand.

The verses at the end of our passage clearly round up the sequence of parables which began with the sower (4:3), but if you read the first two verses of chapter 4 and then read the last two verses of our passage today (missing out the parables themselves), then you will see that they make sense together. This is further proof that Mark intended us to read the whole section together not just as individual parables, but as a unit which describes the heart of Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God here in Mark's Gospel.

Most preachers can make something useful out of each of the parables. Jesus' appeal for us to put the light 'on a stand' (4:21,22) is not just a call to evangelism, but a call for God's people to be open and transparent in all their dealings; the Kingdom of God was never designed to be kept inside church buildings, for its purpose has always been the winning of the nations. The second saying (4:24,25) is more difficult, but Jesus has taken a well known saying of His day to explain the Kingdom. The saying was something like this, and we say similar things today; 'the more you have the more you get'. However, Jesus gave these words a more positive slant by suggesting through this that those with little would gain more. The Kingdom grows from small beginnings; this is an important principle.

The parable of the growing seed (4:26-29) is fascinating because it talks about the difference between the work of God and the work of people in the Kingdom. In this parable, God is responsible for the growth, but the farmer is responsible for the harvest, and consequently, this reading is an open invitation to a preacher to talk about mission and the partnership between God and people by which it works. Lastly, the famous parable of the growth of the mustard seed, the 'smallest of seeds', into the largest of shrubs speaks directly about the power of God which lies behind the Kingdom of God. Once the seed has been sown, it will grow far more than people might imagine, indeed, it will exceed expectation. Again, this story is an invitation to any preacher to speak about the power of God at work in our world and the growth of the Kingdom of God.

So, this whole reading is a fascinating summary of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, and the points it raises are all complimentary. The whole passage deserves to be preached upon as one unit so that people gain a rounded view of the kingdom of God.

### Going Deeper

How do these parables work together with the parable of the sower, and how will this help us understand them better? What are Mark's purposes in putting these parables together, and should they be studied separately at all? These and other questions will help us explore these parables further, and we will now look at each of them, keeping the rest in mind.

#### ***The divine secret and the lamp on a lamp stand***

The whole purpose of the Kingdom of God is to become known, and although Jesus had a difficult ministry bringing this Good News to the world, the divine secret with which He had been entrusted was a secret which He had the job of revealing. The brief parable about placing a lamp in a room is full of potential meaning, but it is most clear when used to explain this about

Jesus' ministry and the Kingdom of God. When explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke to the disciples of the divine 'secret' of the Kingdom of God, but it is profoundly short sighted of us to think that Jesus was talking about a secret which He had to keep. No, His secret, the coming of God's Kingdom and its growth to harvest, was something which had to be exposed. What Jesus struggled with was how best to do this. He chose to talk about it in parables to the crowds and to the disciples directly (4:10,11,34); but it would be some time before the disciples would fully understand it (4:13, 6:52, 7:18 etc.).

On the surface, it seems uncertain whether this parable was spoken to the crowds or the disciples, and scholars tend to ask whether 'them' at the beginning of verse 21 refers to one or the other. In reality, this whole passage indicates (see above) that Jesus may well have delivered this and the other parables many times over. Indeed, there are two places in chapter 4 of Mark (4:10,11,34) which suggest that whilst the parable (v21) was spoken to the crowds, its explanation (v22) was addressed to the disciples! The explanation of the parable given by Jesus is clear enough; it is about how God's secret, the Kingdom is revealed (4:22). We can preach as much as we like about 'not hiding your light under a bushel', but this personal witness interpretation of the passage does not do justice to what Jesus Himself said it meant.

#### ***The more you have the more you get?***

There is some evidence that there was an oriental saying 'the more you have the more you get, and the less you have the more will be taken from you'. This expressed the social reality of life, rather like we say, 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer'. Oriental warlords gathered riches to themselves at will, whilst the poor peasant farmer was often taxed out of a living in return for the so-called protection of an Empire or a warlord. Taken by itself, it is hard to see that this saying has much of a purpose in the preaching of Jesus. Jesus was an advocate of the poor (10:21, 12:42f.) and a frequent opponent of the rich (10:25, 12:41). Some preachers, however, link this saying not to wealth but to faith, and use it alongside some other saying of Jesus about faith to talk about how faith grows from small beginnings (see Matt 17:20); but this does not explain the other side of the parable very well.

It is far better to read these words as an important part of the sequence of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom. Once someone's eyes had been opened to the secrets of the Kingdom, then much more revelation was still to come; however, if a person was closed to the idea that Jesus was the Messiah 'even what he has will be taken away'. These last words sound dire in most other contexts, but here, they are clear. It was the religious authorities in particular who had rejected Jesus, and the ultimate consequence of their rejection would be that they would lose much of their special relationship with God. People in the crowds who heard Jesus say these parables also faced a choice, either to accept Him as Messiah or reject Him. From this simple yet profound choice, the future was decided, and that is the point of the saying.

#### ***The growing seed***

The growing seed is the one parable that is unique to Mark's Gospel. It is not found in Matthew or in Luke! It obviously has links with the parable of the sower because it is a story about the growth of the seed. The emphases of the story are quite different from 'the sower' however, for in this case, the sower is not God, and no particular meaning is attached to the seed. The story is in three parts, the initial burst of earthly activity in which a farmer scatters seed, then a period of heavenly activity in which the farmer does nothing but get on with daily life (4:27), and the seed grows 'secretly' ('the earth creates produce all by itself ...' 4:28), then finally, the harvest comes and the farmer has to act quickly to 'put in the sickle' (4:29).

What does this parable mean in its setting here in Mark's Gospel? It tells us that the growth of the Kingdom is something that we can do little about, but our task is to be ready for the harvest. The message seems to be that once the seed is sown, it will grow and nothing will stop the fact that a harvest time will come. In Jesus' day as in ours, plenty of people were prepared to think of God's work in the world as 'religion' which had little to do with their normal lives, and their duty was to do the regular rounds of religious activities demanded of them, worshipping in the synagogues and attending feasts. Jesus says that the demands of God's Kingdom are different, and its coming requires us to be ready to act, and like the farmer, we have decisions to make and work to do. The whole emphasis of the story is on the activity of harvesting, of putting in the sickle 'because the harvest has come' (4:29). There is much more still to come in Mark's Gospel about the meaning of this harvest, but when we put this parable together with the others in this chapter of Mark's Gospel, the harvest appears to be people who make up God's Kingdom here on earth.