Sermon: Matthew 13. Parable of the Mustard Seed

‘Mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow’ is a proverb claimed by just about everybody, and meaning that even from the smallest seed, great growth can emerge. From a mustard seed perhaps in the Holy Land, when Jesus was teaching? Tiny little black seeds growing- not into plants- but into trees, trees big enough to house birds who built their nests in them? And big is best isn’t it? The bigger the better, in our more for your money, all you can eat, two for one, nothing to pay for 12 months society? And of course the parable of the mustard seed is a metaphor for the kingdom of God. It starts in small ways and grows into something much bigger. And we are not to worry if at first things look small and fragile, because that’s how all great things start. Isn’t that a neat little summary of what Jesus was on about in today’s gospel? Well we know better than to imagine Jesus would let us off this lightly with a message so simple, so we need to take the trouble to drill down to get nearer to the point. There’s a lot in it about Heaven. Now Heaven is important to Americans. According to a recent Gallup Poll 9 in 10 Americans believe in God and 81% believe in heaven. Only 69% of Americans believe that they have a good chance of getting to heaven. 53% believe doing good works will get them to heaven, which means a whopping 47% aren’t counting on good works to do the job (or perhaps they aren’t DOING good works).

So, we say we believe in God, want to believe in Heaven, aren’t sure we know how to get there and if doing good works will get us there. No one has reported back to give us any tips so we’re left to wonder: What is heaven like? Well we have to die to find out. Going along this interpretive route I think has its limitations except that on the day we are about to welcome Virginia June at the start of her Christian journey in her baby life, we do well to remind ourselves of the juxtaposition between death – the recurring theme in the Baptismal rite – and rebirth from unworthiness into life in Christ and promises of entering his kingdom.

Perhaps the real key message of this parable is that you can have a growing faith even if starts out as small as a mustard seed, which, by the way, 3 of the gospel writers point out the smallest of all seeds. I was thinking about how puzzling this is, as I toasted a poppy seed bagel this week. Because mustard seeds aren’t particularly small and are about 6 times as big as poppy seeds for a start. How do we go from a superficially simple little story to one of intriguing riddles? I mean, is it really credible that from a little seed a tree big enough for birds to live, and would grow? What’s the point of the exaggeration? Luke’s version of this parable is much subtler than Matthew’s, and in its subtlety makes its meaning much clearer. He says ‘What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.’ One grain. He was hoping for a little plant or if he could find some miracle gro, maybe a shrub. But what did he get? A massive great tree! And the sound of the crows cawing in the branches kept him awake from that day onwards.

Here’s the difference. Matthew tells a story as if it was cause and effect. A man plants a seed and it grows extra tall, but Luke tells us a real parable - a story about something extremely unusual and surprising. Mustard seeds don’t usually grow into trees - and that’s the point. So what is the kingdom of God like? Well, it’s like the story of a man who planted a mustard seed and ended up with a huge oak. That’s what the kingdom of God is like. It’s surprising, it’s not like the usual kinds of things that happen, and it knocks your socks off with its
absurdity. You plant a mustard seed and you get a huge tree!

And how does this make us understand what the kingdom of God is like? Well one example might be that small actions of giving can make an impact on the lives of people in third world countries. We may feel that we don’t have much power or much to give, but, every little helps’. And that’s a comforting thought.

But parables are not meant to be comforting little thoughts. Jesus didn’t get crucified for comforting little hallmark thoughts. He didn’t get proclaimed a prophet, messiah and Son of God, by telling what we we already know. And the parable of the mustard seed - and many other parables of Jesus - tell us that the Kingdom of God is nothing to do with common sense, but something extraordinary, miraculous and unexpected - and that it’s different from anything we can have predicted. In the Kingdom of God, it won’t be just that our small gifts will achieve a lot - it will be that the hungry will be fed, and the captives set free and the lame will leap. What we are waiting and longing for and praying for here - week by week at St. Joseph’s - is not that things will get a little bit better - but that the world will be utterly transformed. Of course we want to support and even instigate the many excellent ways of making changes to the world - but it can’t be just about making small changes - it has to be about something greater and more radical.

The Christian agencies we support do great work. Many people, among the poorest of the world, when they’ve been given a small loan and some education and support - achieve great things through education, enterprises and independence. These changed lives and stories of hope are surely signs of the Kingdom of God, coming among us. But the world waits still, the Horn of Africa, Haiti, and Honduras. They are groaning in travail, waiting for the kingdom of God to come. And let’s not forget the promise that Jesus brought - that the Kingdom of God is at hand. And what is it like, this Kingdom?

Well, here’s a way it’s like. I was slumped on the sofa idly flicking through the TV channels this week – I know I need to get out more. And as a last resort I hit on one of the God channels. An English man with a thick London accent was telling his life story. Born into a rough working class family, his father was a DJ in a strip club his mother, an alcoholic, and they separated soon after his birth. He played truant from school, got into fights, indulged in every excess of drink and drugs. At 18 he was dumped by his pregnant girlfriend, living in a squat, burgling houses and shops and everything he owned was stolen. At 6 feet 7inches tall he was endlessly pulled in by the police and constantly in trouble for his anti social behavior.

He told of how midst this broken purposeless existence he would often wonder about a higher meaning, and thrash around for answers and purpose to his chaotic life. One day he went into a phone booth and among all the calling cards for taxi companies and prostitutes tucked into crevices and stuck on the phone booth walls, was a small picture of Jesus with the words Follow Me printed below. He saw that card had been left there by an employee of a nearby Christian bookshop and he felt emboldened to go in and explore, and ask to be directed to simple books that would introduce him to Jesus and his teachings. Soon he was offered a job in the bookshop, met people who encouraged and supported him. He began taking instruction in a nearby church, went on retreats, and received the sacraments. Within 3 years he was a Franciscan Friar, working in the Bronx in a soup kitchen and food bank, cleaning lavatories, washing up, living a simple life. That was in 1988 and today Brother Francis Edkins is in England, building the kingdom of God in a thriving little Franciscan mission, right
back in a rough part of the east end of London, spreading the word, serving the community, steady in worship and praise.

Let’s just re-visit that great big tree sprouting from the little seed angle. It makes a good story if you take it literally, a wonderful story and a better, lasting strategy for building the kingdom of God. It’s about building a steady enduring mission with steady building blocks of strong liturgy, sacramental centering, bible study, outreach that stretches us. It’s not about raising the roof, huge headcounts, and razzmatazz in the aisles. A large mega church was having a drive for new members, and at a rally in 1984 it adopted the slogan ‘A million more in 84’. One minister leaned over to another when the catchy title was announced, and whispered: 'If we get a million more like the ones we have, we’re sunk'. It’s not about numbers, not about bigger is best. Real success of a church and of building the kingdom is not gauged number of members but in their holiness - no matter how few they may be! John Wesley (a lifelong Anglican) said: 'Do not give me the big ecclesiastical battalions, give me a hundred men, who fear nothing but sin, and love nothing but God, and I will shake the gates of hell'.

Let’s be careful we don’t over - or under - interpret the parable of the mustard seed with botanical significance and detail. Let’s instead remember John Wesley who travelled miles on horseback to preach the word of his God in villages and towns, leaving the message of his faith to whoever showed up, running the gamut of inclement weather, indifference and scorn. He criss-crossed first the counties of England, later with the Moravians, the newly forming United States. A faithful plod, you might say, from seed to healthy germination and lasting growth, rather than a miracle gro bolt from seed to a tree that might become blighted, overblown and unproductive.

To Br Francis Edkins on TV this week that little picture stuck on the wall of the phone booth was the mustard seed. Twenty years later this gentle but still rough diamond of a man all 6 feet 7 inches of him is a steady, challenged but blight resistant tree. Seeing him sitting in his simple Franciscan garb it is easy to imagine him strutting his stuff in stolen designer ghetto gear. An imposing yet menacing stereotype of an east end thug, who, but for a tiny mustard seed would no doubt be serving time for his latest crime. The path had been set for his miserable life, and it seemed unremitting and inevitable.

But someone planted a mustard seed in the phone booth, against the odds and an unlikely tree grew. Something lasting and authentic which changed a life which changed other lives, and continues to change lives. Not big flashy growth but steady growth. Let’s stand back and admire that, as a gardener might admire a well dug furrow, ready for planting. And then let’s dig in and tend and nurture and nourish the growth in ourselves and the growth in others. Because that’s where the Kingdom of God is to be found.

Amen.