

Sermon on Sunday 26 July 2020

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Reading reference: Matthew 13. 31

There are 11 passages in Matthew's Gospel that begin with the words, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like this...' We heard four of them this morning. We're going to look at the first one.

'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed'

We're talking about black mustard here, which you'll find all over the Middle East. Its seeds aren't especially small, and it doesn't actually grow into a tree. It grows rapidly into big bushes up to 9 feet high. That's big, and it's a lot of shade in a hot, dry country.

So why is it like the Kingdom of Heaven?

About the time Matthew was writing his Gospel, the great Roman historian and scientist Pliny the Elder was writing his famous 'Natural History', which he sadly left unfinished when he died in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. This is what he had to say about black mustard:

"Mustard is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand once it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get your fields free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once."

I'd like to say that was my own translation, but I have to admit I got that from Wikipedia.

It's very good for your health – but once it's planted it runs wild all over the place and you can't control it. I think that suits the Kingdom of Heaven very well, don't you?

To some it is life and healing, but to others it is like a weed, you can't control it, it's a darned nuisance popping up where you don't want it. Jesus warned us, didn't he? The Kingdom of God would have many enemies, but no matter how hard they tried, they would not be able to weed it out.

I do like the idea of God's Kingdom growing like a weed. Pushing its way up between the slabs where people, for so many reasons, have tried to pave over the beautiful but unruly garden of faith, because it won't grow as we want it, or it offends our desire for order and control over our lives. Christians can be as guilty of that as anyone. But our God is subversive. He's the original guerrilla gardener.

But for His Kingdom to grow, He still needs a seed to be planted. This is the challenge to us.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not a distant, spiritual hope. The Kingdom of Heaven is what actually happens when people like us listen to God and do things His way.

Every time you say to yourself, 'I will do this God's way', you're sowing a mustard seed, and the Kingdom of Heaven germinates, and who knows what it may grow into.

Black mustard plants don't grow in isolation. They grow in clumps, close together. They like community. And,

like I said, they're not trees. They're annuals. The plant only lives for one year. It grows all the way up from a seed, and then dies back into the soil.

Sowing the Kingdom of Heaven is not a one-off event. It's **not** like planting an acorn and watching a huge oak tree that will take a hundred years to grow and will stand for hundreds more.

The seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven are being constantly replanted, germinating again and again for new, vigorous growth.

Maybe our idea of the Kingdom of Heaven can be bit too institutional, a bit too static. A bit too much of an oak tree. Jesus never gives us a definition of the Kingdom of Heaven, he doesn't give it a written Constitution. He just gives us lots of pictures and stories drawn from daily life. A wonderful kaleidoscope of how different the world can be if only we listen to His Father.

Of course, when **we** encounter mustard, it's not usually in a field. It's in a little jar, and although it's yellow, it's made from the seed of the white mustard plant.

Who's a mustard fan? I looked in the fridge at home [last night] and found 7 different kinds of mustard! Can anyone beat that? I wonder what our mustard can tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven.

It's a condiment. Mustard isn't meant to be eaten on its own. You eat it with something, whether it's spread on ham or hot dogs or Welsh rarebit, or mixed in mayonnaise or salad dressing.

You don't eat it by the spoonful, especially if you are using traditional English mustard. Just the tiniest little dab spread on cold ham, and my taste buds are in heaven.

A little makes even the most ordinary of food taste special. Have we got a parable there? The Kingdom of Heaven is when God's grace, and our faithfulness, our willingness to listen to him and do just one ordinary little thing His way, makes our world taste special.

The Kingdom of Heaven isn't something that's going to happen, in another time or another place. It's meant to be mixed in with our lives. It's something that happens, here and now, in our ordinary experiences and daily routines, if we only let God be our Lord and guide.

Listen to God. Let him spice up your life. Give it a dash of the Kingdom of Heaven.

