

God is like a farmer/twitcher – Matthew 13:31-32, Ezekiel 17:22-24

Over the last three weeks, we've looked at Jesus' parables about seeds; seeds planted by a foolish farmer, seeds planted by a patient farmer, and – today – seeds planted by a farmer with very very fine motor skills because, Jesus says, this farmer takes, *"the smallest of all the seeds,"* and sows it in their field – and *"the smallest of all the seeds"* grows into *"the greatest of shrubs and become a tree!"*

So, firstly, this is a parable, a story that illustrates what God's kingdom is like, that says little things become big things! But secondly, it is a parable that questions the nature of those big things and suggests another way of being 'big', and, finally, it is about the paradox of God's kingdom - the greatest of entities that welcomes the lowest and least in our world.

So, firstly, the parable says – as Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly tells us – that, *"from little things big things grow!"* It reminds us of the very basic, but miraculous nature of nature(!) – that plants start as small, often invisible, seeds, and become large, flourishing plants, or tall, towering trees.

Running this through the fact checker, Jesus uses storyteller's license here to say the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds. It's not. The smallest seeds in the world come from the orchid family, like jewel orchids (*Anoectochilus imitans*) which produce seeds like microscopic dust, 0.05 millimetres in length.

And for your interest – because I find this amazing - the largest trees to grow from the smallest seeds are the giant sequoias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) found on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevadas in California. Their seeds are the size of pinheads, but the trees grow to 50 to 85 meters in height and 6 to 8 meters in diameter. As tall as a 26-story building and as wide as a street!

None of this changes what Jesus is saying in this parable. His point is that the kingdom of God, growing in our lives and in our world, may not seem very large, may not appear that impactful, but that smallness can be deceiving. One day, what looked small will be seen as truly great.

I've told before a story Archbishop Desmond Tutu told when he received the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize; how when he was nine, he and his mother were walking down the street in Johannesburg, and coming the other way was Trevor Huddleston, a white Anglican priest who worked in the slums of Sophiatown. At that time, during apartheid, when a black person met a white person on a footpath, they were expected to step down into the gutter to allow them to pass. But before Tutu and his mother could move, Huddleston stepped down, and, as they passed, he tipped his hat to Tutu's mother.

When Tutu asked his mother why, she told him Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the footpath because he was a man of God. And that very small action in that one moment, Tutu says, was the defining moment of his life. He found his calling, *“When she told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God.”*

In the same way, our actions, our words, our choices, however small and seemingly insignificant if made in service of the kingdom of God become part of the defining and the growing of the kingdom of God in our world, from *“the smallest of all the seeds”* to the *“greatest of shrubs”*.

But there is more to this parable than little becoming big. We gain a greater perspective on God’s kingdom when we ask, ‘What tree is that?’

When I was little – before the internet – we identified plants and trees through books! In our house it was Stirling Macoboy’s *What plant is that?* or *What tree is that?* And this parable raises a ‘What tree is that?’ moment because, although Jesus mentions a tree and evokes Old Testament images of trees, he does not really seem to be talking about trees!

The trees in the Old Testament – apart from Ezekiel 17 that we read this morning – are problematic images. Yes, they are tall – towering high above all the trees, Ezekiel says, as tall as 26-story buildings. Yes, they are beautiful. Yes, they provide food and shelter. But they are also proud and oppressive. They represent the empires of the Babylonians and the Assyrians and the Egyptians. What Jesus is saying, is that magnificence and munificence can be used to dominate and smother and oppress others.

This is a paradox we are very familiar with, one that we see playing itself out around our world. In order to have peace, it tells us, we must have more violence. In order to be great we must weed out the weakest.

As Jon Guerra’s song says, the *Kingdom of Jesus* song we heard earlier:
*To what shall we compare the spirit of the hour
If not a sword
It frees and unites us,
Enslaves and divides us in violence
Come help us, Lord...*

And so, Jesus is not speaking of a mighty tree in Matthew. He is speaking about an ordinary shrub, a shrub that many considered to be a weed, which has the qualities of a tree in that it offers shelter to the birds of the air, but does not act like the trees described in Ezekiel 31 or Daniel 4 where the trees symbolise empire.

I am reminded of what Jesus says to the disciples in Matthew 20:25-28 about , *“the rulers of the gentiles lord[ing] it over them...their great ones [being] tyrants... It will not be so among you,”* he says, *“but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

The picture of the kingdom of God that we see in this tree-bush is a place where serving one another rules – not where rulers are served – it is a place where life is given – not where it is taken away – a place where *“the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

This is the final picture of God’s kingdom in this parable – that it is a place where life is nurtured – all life is nurtured – where the birds of the air can rest and nest.

If we go back to our Ezekiel 17 reading, the birds symbolise the people of all the nations who have lived under Assyrian and Babylonian oppression, *“every kind of bird...winged creatures of every kind”*, and here in Matthew Jesus is saying that the tree-bush that is the kingdom of God will be a place where, the same way, all will find hospitality that supports and nurtures life rather than destroying it.

I am reminded of that critique of Christianity by 2nd century Roman philosopher, Celsus, saying, *“[Christians] show they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable, and stupid, only slaves, women, and little children”* (Cels. 3.44). Under the tree-bush of the kingdom of God every kind of bird, small defenceless vulnerable birds, can live.

And this is what we have been part of in our different initiatives, over the decades of this church, the work of that tree-bush of the kingdom of God; caring for the elderly in Canberra, welcoming refugees, reaching out to our local indigenous community, affirming the gifts and ministry of women, recognising LGBTIQ+ people as children of God; all the offering the shade of the branches of the kingdom of God to winged creatures of every kind.

And that work continues, it continues as I said in our small - seemingly insignificantly small - actions and words and choices that grow the kingdom of God. It continues as we resist the tall tree empires of our world and their methodologies and culture. And it continues as we continue to be a place that welcomes and nurtures and offers life to the vulnerable of our community and our city, in the ways we have been doing and perhaps in new ways that we have yet to explore.

And we do not do this alone or in our own strength, but in the company of Jesus who through his life offers us a place to rest and nest in the life of God.