

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32

“He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

This parable is very special to me because it is one of two parables the Lord gave me thirty-three years ago when we established Churchlands Christian Fellowship; the church from which Southern Cross Centre has evolved. The Lord used this Parable to prophetically show me how the church would grow from small beginnings. Just for your information, Churchlands started in 1987 with a group of forty adults and twenty children. Within five years, the fellowship had grown to over 500 adult members.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed explains how God’s Kingdom works. From small beginnings, God’s Kingdom grows to become a place where many nations are gathered into it. In Australia, we have a commercial for what are called Industry-sponsored Superannuation funds. (Explain) The commercial shows a person cupping their hands (Illustrate) and then says, *“Out of little things, big things grow.”*

So, why is the Parable of the Mustard Seed timely now? Two crucial insights stand out:

1. We should never despise the day of small beginnings.

Many years ago, the Prophet Zechariah, was given revelation to motivate and encourage the people of Judah to complete the rebuilding of the temple. Following their exile in Babylon, the Jews were allowed to return to Judea and rebuilding the temple was important to their spiritual renewal, and passion for the Lord.

Zechariah 4:1-14

Some of the Judeans thought the work on the temple was insignificant, but God was in this rebuilding programme and would enable Zerubbabel to finish it. The vision of the Gold Lampstand and Two Olive Trees is interesting. The lampstand with the bowl on top represents an abundant supply of oil (the fullness of God’s power through His Spirit). The two Olive Trees represent Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the royal descendant of David. Together, they would do God’s work to rebuild the temple bring the people back to God.

All of God’s great works have small beginnings. Maybe the Lord has given you a small seed, an idea or a dream that could bring God much glory. That’s exactly what I thought 33 years ago, and what I’m thinking now, as we establish the foundations of Southern Cross Centre. Just like the Judeans did not see why Zerubbabel rebuilding the temple was important to God,

some may not see the significance of the seed God has planted in your heart. But do not be discouraged, good things come to those who persevere. If the seed is of God, He will water it and make it grow. A great author, Henry David Thoreau, once wrote,

“If you have built castles in the air, Your work need not be lost—that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

If you have a dream, ask God to reinvigorate you to pursue it. If you have never had a dream, ask God to reveal His dream for you.

2. The Covid-19 Virus Is Forcing Churches to Reset Priorities

Remember, the Parable of the Mustard Seed paints an expansive picture of what God’s Kingdom is to become. **Matthew 13:32** reminds us, *“Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”*

Jesus taught that the Kingdom would become a tree, where birds of the air could find shelter in its branches. This means the Kingdom is meant to be big. In the Parable, Jesus alluded to a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. Daniel interprets the King’s dream, which portrays his stature as being like a great tree.

Daniel 4:20-22

Note verses 20-21, this describes what God’s Kingdom is like, *“A tree...large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air..”*

Jesus was saying that the Father wants His Kingdom to extend over all creation, be visible to the whole earth, provide food and shelter for all, and nesting places for all creatures. Unfortunately, this picture is a far cry from what we see in most churches today. We are not hugely visible and influential, instead we have retreated into ourselves, seeking ever larger crowds who want comfortable facilities. We have corralled the saints and not equipped and sent them into the harvest field.

Things are about to change. We are beginning to see two types of church leaders right now. One is just waiting for things to get back to normal so we can do church the way we’ve always done it. They ask, “When do you think we’ll be able to reopen our churches?” While we don’t know the answer, it’s probably longer than we think.

However, here’s a second type of leader who’s beginning to emerge. They aren’t so concerned about *when* we return to normal, because they know normal is not that great. They are seeing a bigger picture than just Sunday meetings. They see more than local church, they see the Kingdom, and what is possible in the new season.

Recently one of my SCAC friends sent me an article by a US Pastor named Tony Morgan. He wrote a powerful book entitled, 7 Shifts Churches Need to Make Because of the Coronavirus. I resonate with Tony's observations and believe we need to sit up and take notice as we look toward the future at Southern Cross Centre. While the virus is a terrible thing, it may be a cloud with a silver lining, signalling a reset for churches in seven ways:

- **Shift from analogue to digital.** Digital technology is here to stay and we should use this technology, not just for streaming Sunday services, but more broadly to equip people in how to do the works of Jesus.
- **Shift from teaching to equipping.** Teaching is important, but in the past, we have depended on one-way monologues rather than equipping and activating people to pursue God's mission for our lives
- **Shift from gathering to connecting.** Even before the crisis, people had less and less time to gather at the church. Because of isolation during this crisis, people are seeing the need for friendship and community. We need to connect at a deeper level than before.
- **Shift from global to local.** In the past, we've tended to define 'mission' as going to distant places or going on mission trips. Maybe God is challenging us to give more attention to reach our local community, reaching people outside the church and outside the faith.
- **Shift from over-spending to generosity.** Maybe God wants us to re-examine how we spend our money, as a church and as individuals. Are we sowing into things that actually build God's Kingdom?
- **Shift from complexity to simplicity.** Rather than lots of complicated programmes and activities, maybe God wants us to do fewer things and do them better.
- **Shift from counting attendees (and now viewers) to engagement.** Our primary goal is not to build our audience but to make disciples. We want to connect people into the Body of Christ and train them to be disciples, rather than just increase our audience who attend and/or watch our services.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed explains how God's Kingdom works. From small beginnings, the Kingdom grows into a large a visible tree. Three lessons we can take home:

- 1) Never despise the days of small beginnings. What seed or idea has God put in your heart? Pursue it, persevere, and see it grow.
- 2) The virus is forcing churches to reset our priorities. It's no longer business as usual. God wants His people to rise to a higher, Kingdom level, and re-think how we do most things.
- 3) What is God saying to you and what are you going to do about it?