Mark 4:26-34

TITLE PAGE
The Private Life of Plants. An unusual title. It was used by the BBC’s wildlife people to educate us about the inner working of plants about 20 years ago.

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH
In common with the private life of animals shows, it involved David Attenborough who has been in BBC shows since time immemorial. Here he is with a cameraman filming grass.

PLANTS
The idea of the series was that there were lots of programmes made about the private lives of animals – and people really like these educational wildlife documentaries. But plants? They somehow don’t really attract the same interest do they? But plants are something we either take for granted as they are all around us, or we appreciate for their beauty. What would our church look like without a spray of flowers every week?

FIELD OF BARLEY
In truth, without plants, there would be no other life on earth. We rely on plants to provide our food, or to feed other creatures that we eat. They are critical for our survival. Our modern society tends to separate us from the land because we get what we want from the supermarket or other food shops. But for the people Jesus was telling parables to; stories of soil, seed and sowers had a resonance with them. To them the growing of plants, crops was something they were intimately familiar with.

LIST OF PARABLES
So here again is the list of parables we have been looking at. As we found in earlier sermons, the first few in chapter 4, all have connection with one another and they all involve crops. And there is a continuity of thought here, and the two we read today relate to the first.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER
The first parable we looked at was the Sower. We call it the parable of the sower, but it is really about the fate of the seed – the word of God – in the lives of men and women, signified by the soil.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOIL
At the time, I speculated whether this parable should be called the parable of the soil rather than the sower, particularly as we can each can reflect on the soil of our own lives – are we receptive, do we produce fruit. In fact as we looked at the two “parablettes” last time, we realised that our spiritually productivity as God’s people depends on not trying to hide what we’re like from Him – a waste of time anyway as He’s all knowing – and understanding that the measure of what comes out of us depends on how much we are prepared to commit to Him.

THE PARABLE OF THE SEED
But the Parable of the Sower isn’t just about the soil, but the fate of the seed. In one sense it is as much a parable about the fate of the seed as it’s about the soil. What was the seed? The word of God; God speaking to men and women. It’s clear that the seed, given the opportunity to grow in people’s lives, will produce a massive crop. But what is yielding a crop all about? What does spiritual growth look like? Just as Jesus gave us some words as to what stops God’s word from growing in us, the last two parable sin this group tells us what happens when the the word of God grows in people, the Kingdom of God grows.
THE PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED

So here we are on the Parable of the Growing Seed. It's unique to Mark's Gospel.

"The Kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed in his field. 27 He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens. 28 The soil itself makes the plants grow and bear fruit; first the tender stalk appears, then the head, and finally the head full of grain. 29 When the grain is ripe, the man starts cutting it with his sickle, because harvest time has come."

This brings us back to the Private Life of Plants. For most of us, we have no biological experience. We have no idea how plants actually grow. We plant seeds, they grow. In those days, farmers had even less of an idea of the biology of plants. As Jesus said: He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens. But I'll tell you what he does know and that's the conditions are required to make it the crop grow. So he plants, manages, wats and then reaps.

How does the word of God and therefore the kingdom of God?

These verses suggest three thing are necessary if we are to cultivate spiritual growth

THE FERTILITY OF THE SOIL

The seed is planted in the ground. Let's use the same picture of seed as the Parable of the Sower. It's the word of God. God speaks into lives. And as with that parable, growth occurs when the soil is sufficiently fertile for growth. Farmers in those days may not have known much about nutrients, plant hormones, photosynthesis, genetics or the like. They had no idea of the private life of plants but they did know that certain soils produced better than others and they had to do certain things to the soil in order to improve fertility. The mystery was that after they planted the seed, it grew until it was ready for harvest. They couldn't give you the biology, but they did know it would grow. How it grows was a mystery, but they recognised the hand of the Maker in it. The couldn't control the sun and the rain so they gave God thanks for their harvests.

I've said this many times before: it's the Holy Spirit that converts people. He also enlightens those who turn to Christ. He opens our minds to understand God's word. He brings spiritual growth. He does that, but like the sower, the farmer, there is much we can and must do to bring growth on. We can and need to bring that word to those that don't know Jesus, to bring encouragement, teaching, fellowship, example, and help to one another, and to allow the word of God to dwell richly in our hearts. In those kinds of conditions the word of God grows and the kingdom of God is built up.

It's what we are called to do. Faith and growth doesn't just happen. Yes it's true that growth is wrought by the Holy Spirit. But we can and should be the instruments by which the seed is sown, cultivated and reaped.

THE SOWER KNOWS THE SEASONS

Going on from that, the farmer knows when to sow and he knows when the grain is ripe. As I said on an earlier occasion, we often think of the farmer or sower as God, but that's not the case – it's anyone who sows the word of God. And when we sow the word of God in people's life and see the life and the growth, we are the same people that are called to harvest.

There's an important principle here – we can't harvest if we haven't sown. Last time we saw that in our lives, the measure we give is the measure we get. It's the same principle with sowing the word of God. God wants to bless us, but He can't pour out the blessing if there's nothing to pour it into. If we want to reap, we need to sow. The more we sow, the more we reap.
I believe that as a church we are coming to one of those points in our life and ministry where we are being called to sow in new ways. Many of the traditional activities we have done over the years have run down or disappeared. They have come to the end of their life cycle or are coming to their end. They produced good crops many years ago. But now?

There comes a time when we have to re-plough the field and sow new crops. The time is now and we are already planning to break the soil here – literally with our new project. And what for? So we can sow. As many of you know I’ve been burdened for some time to see how we might as a church reach out to those in our community in the younger age groups. Like other churches in town, we have see a decline in these groups. Do we just sit by and say hard luck on us, or do we break the ground and sow a new crop? I think you know the answer to that already.

THE SOWER DOES THE REAPING
All we know from the seasons is that if we sow, the Holy Spirit does His work and there will be a season for reaping again. We can already see the possibilities of many new houses in Walton and the Trimleys. Many will go to the younger generation – to families. We need to be ready, prepared so we reap.

So in the coming months, we shall be considering many possibilities for how we sow seed in our community. If we want to reap we need to sow and most of all to be patient. Sowed crops take a while to grow and flourish – and they do it in God’s time because He gives the increase, the growth. But if we don’t sow, don’t expect to reap. The parable of the measure last time points us to this principle. And as I said last time, when we give, God blesses out of proportion to what was ever put in. We just have to be willing, ready.

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED
The last parable of this set, takes everything just one step further:

30 “What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like?” asked Jesus. “What parable shall we use to explain it? 31 It is like this. A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground. 32 After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.”

The Kingdom of God. I haven’t defined it yet. I left it until now. The Kingdom of God isn’t a geographical place, like Israel for example. It’s a people, not a territory. And the Kingdom of God is wherever the rule of God has been accepted. If you’ve accepted Christ, then the rule of God is over you. The thing about rule is it’s about hearts and minds. The best citizens any political leader will tell you are the ones that are 100% behind you, body and soul.

This is a massive contrast to the great nations of that period which were all about the conquest of territory be armies and the subduing of the barbarians by force. The *pax romana* was great and obvious, but the Kingdom of God was quite different:

*A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground. 32 After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.*

This seems to be an allusion to Ezekiel 17 and 31 which both talk about the great nations of Egypt and Assyria as huge cedars which protect the birds of the air. They are the strongest most maginificent trees of the forest.
Here’s a bit of Ezekiel 31:

“To whom would you compare your greatness? 3 You are like mighty Assyria, which was once like a cedar of Lebanon, with beautiful branches that cast deep forest shade and with its top high among the clouds. 4 Deep springs watered it and helped it to grow tall and luxuriant. The water flowed around it like a river, streaming to all the trees nearby. 5 This great tree towered high, higher than all the other trees around it. It prospered and grew long thick branches because of all the water at its roots. 6 The birds nested in its branches, and in its shade all the wild animals gave birth. All the great nations of the world lived in its shadow.

And what happened to Egypt, and Assyria and Rome – even the British Empire. These great nations, these great cedars of Lebanon all ended up as nothing.

MUSTARD BUSH
As a contrast, the Kingdom of God is described by Jesus as a grain of type of seed that grows into what in Israel is called a mustard bush. It grows up to 5 or 6 feet high in scrubby semi-desert areas, and birds nest and shelter in it. It grows where nothing else grows. If an area is deforested, it still grows. The contrast couldn’t be more clear. Great nations come and go, rise and fall. The Kingdom of God doesn’t look and sound much – look at this outpost here at MRBC! But is the spiritual parched and dry land, it is the place where people can run for help, protection and life. It will always grow ant thrive when everything else is dying around it.

We might not think ourselves up to much as individuals or as a church, but to us God can grow even the smallest and most insignificant into something that where those who are lost, needing hope, needing life can find shelter and grow and thrive. Never think we are insignificant, useless. We bring the greatest promise of life and hope in this world. Be confident in that. Let the Kingdom of God be built up in you – heart and soul!

STATEMENT
The Kingdom of God is about ordinary people bringing something extraordinary into the lives of others by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What I want to leave with you today is this notion – that God has called us to be part of His Kingdom. We are called to sow, we are called to see and appreciate His Spirit working in people’s lives, even if we don’t thoroughly understand His ways. We sit and await the harvest. We reap the harvest. It will come. It will – but only if we sow!

PARABLE OF SOWER
Why did Jesus want to labour these parables about growth? Why did he make sure His disciples understood so that it was very clear. He has called us to amazing work. Be encouraged – put the challenge of sowing and reaping into action. But be warned too – if we want to see the harvest, we need to sow. He who has ears to hear, may he listen!

Preached by Mark Reid
Sunday 27th July 2014 MRBC Felixstowe
© Mark Reid 2014