

The Hidden but Powerful Kingdom

Matthew 13:31-33

Recently, we have been walking with Jesus and his disciples through the *Parables of the Kingdom* in Matthew chapter 13. In these parables, our Lord speaks of hidden things, mysterious things that were not understood, either by the Old Testament prophets, who spoke of things to come, or by the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

In this chapter, Jesus is talking about His *invisible, internal, spiritual* kingdom. He asserts that it has already come and that it would be at work during the period between his first and second comings. This period between our Lord's first Advent and Second Coming has been likened to an interim period, or even an interregnum (period when the kingdom and God's rulership seems to be in suspension). The Church age was not specifically revealed in the Old Testament.

In the parable of the *sower* (13:1-9), Jesus taught that the Gospel would be greeted with considerable disbelief. The Gospel "seeds" fall on four kinds of soil (human hearts), but it is embraced by only one kind. Then, in the parable of the *weeds* (24-30), the Lord teaches that the kingdom of darkness will co-exist with the kingdom of light right up until the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment. We should expect there to be fierce opposition and spiritual warfare. It may even appear, for a time, as if the Kingdom of God is not triumphing!

Now, in the parables of the *mustard seed* and the *leaven*, Jesus speaks of the inauspicious beginnings and hidden workings of his kingdom. It appears on the scene in a surprising, totally unexpected manner, and it seems so insignificant. But things are not always as they seem, neither are they always known until the fullness of time when they come into full bloom. (Notice that Jesus didn't have to explain these two parables. The disciples understood them. So must we.)

The Mustard Seed

The mustard seed was the smallest seed pertaining to agricultural plants, those intentionally grown for food. The mustard plant of Palestine, however, often grows to a height of twelve or fifteen feet. At certain times of the year, its branches become rigid enough to support a bird's nest rather easily. We now know from ancient Jewish literature that the idea of a small mustard seed growing into a large tree was proverbial. So the disciples would have understood the central lesson of this parable; that the kingdom of Heaven, though very small and seemingly insignificant then, would one day grow into a large body of believers.

Think about what the kingdom looked like in Jesus' day. It had few citizens; it was spiritual, and rather invisible. It could not have begun with less fanfare. Christ the King was born in a shed surrounded not by princes and princesses, but by cattle, goats, donkeys. The regions of Judea, in which he was born, and later of Galilee where he grew up, were considered insignificant backwaters of the Roman Empire. Nazareth was among the least promising towns – a fact that prompted Nathaniel to ask Philip, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth (John 1:46)?"

What about the first disciples? None of the “twelve” came from the ranks of Jewish religious leadership or from the socio-economic aristocracy. They were few in number, mainly uneducated, slow to understand and believe, weak, and generally unqualified to be leaders of any significant earthly kingdom. Even at the end of our Lord’s earthly ministry, the group of believers who gathered for prayer just before Pentecost numbered only about 120 (Acts 1:15). So when Jesus ascended to heaven, his kingdom on earth was indeed as small as a mustard seed, relatively speaking.

That’s not the end of the story, however. The mustard seed will grow into a tree larger than all the garden plants. This tree represents the kingdom of Heaven. It will become a blessing to the rest of the world. That’s the meaning of the birds nesting in its branches. Nesting carries the idea of protection, safety, refuge, and sanctuary. What our Lord was saying was that the kingdom of Heaven would grow from tiny beginnings to a great tree that would ultimately provide shelter, protection, and benefit to the entire world.

No doubt, the disciples would have remembered a remarkable dream recorded in Daniel 4. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream in which he beheld:

“A tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong; its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it” (Dan. 4:10-12).

Under Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Empire brought unparalleled advancement in almost every field of endeavor – agriculture, architecture, education, the arts, literature, economics, and many others. Yes, there was slave labor, a certain cost in lives, pride and arrogance, things we do not commend, but it brought prosperity to a large part of the known world at that time. The birds and animals that benefited from the tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream were the other nations of the world. There is the difference, however, between Nebuchadnezzar’s tree and Christ’s tree: while Babylon was doomed to collapse – like all earthly kingdoms – the Kingdom of God, once made visible at our Lord’s return, will never collapse. It will be glorious, shimmering, the eternal home of all who love and serve the Lord. In the words of Psalm 72:8, the Lord “***will have dominion from sea to sea ... and to the ends of the earth.***”

The Leaven

Now briefly consider the leaven. When a small amount is added to bread, it works invisibly on the inside. It permeates the whole loaf! The point of this parable is that small things can have a great influence, the way that a little leaven can permeate a large piece of unleavened dough, causing it to rise.

The lesson is clear. The smallest part of the Kingdom of God that is placed in the world is sure to have tremendous influence, far greater than its initial size would seem to indicate. Why? It contains the limitless power of God Almighty!

Not only that, but the influence is both pervasive and positive. When Christ places believers, who are like leaven, into the world, we tend to cause it to rise; that is, we tend to elevate our surrounding culture by being salt and light. Isn't that what the first Christians did? Remember, they were few in number; they were not drawn from the intelligentsia, from the ranks of Jewish religious leadership, or from the socio-economic aristocracy. In fact, they were much like us – but they turned their world upside down! O yes, there is great hope for us.

Now, let's take a minute to summarize the parables we've covered thus far in our series. Our Lord's teaching is that in spite of great opposition, represented by the three bad soils in his first parable, and by the tares in his second parable, His kingdom will start small and spread in power and influence until it is completely victorious, overcoming the kingdom of darkness. That is precisely what is happening today. The battle is still raging, but the fact is that there have never been more Christians on earth than there are today – and the Kingdom of God continues to spread. Our evangelism and other work often seem to have little immediate or noticeable impact. Be we must not be concerned only with the immediate and noticeable.

Our situation, as I see it, is not unlike the situation during World War II. The world seemed to be sliding into the horrible abyss of Nazism under Hitler. Beginning with the first Blitzkrieg of Poland in 1939, millions of people were oppressed for years. Daily life was dominated by the presence of the German military and the dreaded Schutzstaffel (SS).

But there arose an invisible response, the "underground resistance." Diverse groups of civilians and guerilla fighters from southern France to the northern reaches of Scandinavia to the distant Soviet Union worked secretly against the unholy occupation. They could not overtly resist the powerful German forces, but their covert operations were kept alive by one abiding hope – the rumored coming Allied invasion!

Finally, on June 6, 1944, D-Day, the Allied invasion of Western Europe began when Allied armies stormed the beaches of Normandy. That attack guaranteed the eventual destruction of the Axis powers in Europe. The war continued for another 11 months, with seeming uncertainties along the way, but the outcome had been determined. It wasn't until May 8, 1945 – VE-Day (Victory in Europe) – that the results of the forces set in motion 11 months earlier were realized.

Now listen, when Christ came, it was D-Day in the spiritual realm! Our Lord's death, glorious resurrection, and irrevocable promise to build His church, was the beginning of the end for Satan. When Jesus returns, it will be VE-Day – Victory on Earth Day – for all who are allied with Jesus Christ. In the meantime, we are the Lord's "underground resistance." Our operations may seem insignificant and even covert at times, but they are kept alive by one abiding hope – the return of Christ!

Dear friends, that is not a rumor. It is the Master's promise. We must keep fighting, for although some tough battles remain to be fought, the great war of all time has already been won. The Lord is already marshalling His Allied armies for the last battle. Let's be ready – in full battle dress!