

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 26th July 2026 i.e. 8th Sunday after Trinity.

1 Kings 3:5-12

Romans 8:26-end

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm conscious that there are quite a few people here today who are familiar with the inner workings of Church of England schools. That might be because you attended one; it might be because you sent your children to one; you may have taught or been a governor at one of them; or maybe your experience is some combination of these things.

For those who aren't aware, Church of England schools are tested on, among other things, their distinctively Christian character. I wasn't aware of it being a thing when I attended my local C of E primary school back in the Nineties, but apparently these days schools are encouraged to choose a Bible verse that sums up what they think being a Christian learning institution means to them. I have it on good authority that a couple of our local schools – naming no names of course – have chosen the parable of the mustard seed as their school verse [Matthew 13:31-32]. And I also have it on good authority that some of those schools misinterpret the parable in interesting ways.

Before I go on let me say, I'm not here to criticise those schools. God knows it's hard enough to cultivate a "distinctively Christian character" in a *parish church* most of the time... I can only imagine how hard it is to communicate the Christian faith effectively to kids, parents, and teachers, many of whom are ambivalent about actual Christianity on a good day – and to do that day in, day out. So when I say that the parable of the mustard seed is being misinterpreted in interesting ways, that's exactly what I mean: I find it really interesting. As you all know, I love doing theology; and I find that often I learn more from someone's well-intentioned mistake than I learn from a volume of carefully crafted systematic theology – work that is probably technically correct, but which doesn't get us anywhere.

So in the spirit of curiosity, and the desire to learn, what is this mistaken reading of the parable of the mustard seed? Well, in a nutshell these schools treat the parable merely as a metaphor for growth. "Like a mustard seed, you are small now," say the schools to their pupils, "but one day you will be a lot bigger." They don't just mean physical size, of course; it's also growth in knowledge, in understanding; hopefully, it's moral growth too. I imagine that this reading of the parable is intended

to be consoling to a group of small children. It's difficult going through the education system, and there are times when you wish you could be done already. "That time will come," seems to be the message of the parable: "One day you will have done your growing up."

That message has the benefit of simplicity, and perhaps it is reassuring to some. But even at the basic level – the level of how it's being received by pupils – I can see issues. To a child who dislikes being a child it may be reassuring to be told that one day you will grow up. But what if you already know you're going to have to grow up one day and you're afraid of what growing up might cost you, what you might lose in the process? Plenty of school age kids already have an understanding of the adult world because they've been caring for siblings or parents with extra needs, or because they've experienced hardship or abuse. And that's before you get onto the treadmill of exam preparation and standardised testing. To be frank, these kids don't need their childhoods speeded up; they need them slowed down. They need permission to remain children for a bit longer.

Taken as a story of simple growth, the parable also doesn't communicate any Christian value at all. Growth in itself is no virtue. Schools are not alone in associating growth with goodness – God knows there are powerful voices in the Church of England today which place an inordinate stress on growth: growth in numbers, the planting of new worshipping communities, financial growth... There is a kernel of goodness in talk of quantitative growth, and there are seasons where quantitative growth is a sign of health; but the people who distribute missional funding in the national Church are obsessed with it, almost to the exclusion of everything else. In our culture of church growth I often want to point out: cancer grows. What we really need is individual Christians and church communities who are doing God's will, whatever that looks like. Sometimes that will mean growth; other times I believe it will mean failing boldly.

So what is this parable about? Or to put the question slightly differently, what is the kingdom of heaven like?

Changing that question is the first important step. I think you arrive at a healthier understanding of the parable when you see it, not as a parable about schools or churches, but about the "kingdom of heaven". Part of the reason I'm an Anglican is that I think schools and parish churches are in there somewhere – they are a part of the kingdom of heaven, God's great economy of grace. Problems start to arise with that belief when we take something that ought to be connected to everything else and start treating it as its own thing. If we understood God's will we would see how the way we teach our kids affects the kinds of adults they become; we would see how the way we make our food (or the

way we don't) is connected to the health of our bodies; how the things we desire affect the things we fear... In God's economy all of these things are connected. I see that in the way that this collection of parables seems to defy scale: we begin with a seed, or with a woman kneading dough – things that seem isolated – and we end up with connection and diversity and depth.

In a similar vein, I don't think you can read this parable unless you read it with the other parables. Taken together they have the freedom to push and pull each other – a lot like a woman kneading dough [Matthew 13:33], or a net thrown over the side of a boat [13:47-50], or even the way that the wind pushes and pulls at a growing plant, so that it learns how to support itself. What happens when you read the parable of the mustard seed alongside the other “seed” parables – like the parable of the sower [Matthew 13:1-9], in which some seeds mysteriously thrive and others don't? Or like the parable of the weeds and the wheat [13:24-30], where some of the growth is straightforwardly sinister? Maybe our schools and our churches would be healthier if we read them together.

*

I wonder what we at St Mary's need to learn from the parable of the mustard seed?

I said earlier that it's hard to guarantee that even a parish church community has a distinctively Christian character. What I mean by that is that there are all sorts of deeply unchristian behaviours which thrive in parish churches. Much is always said about the Church of England's resistance to change; and there is something to that. For what it's worth, sometimes that intransigence can be a corrective to silly or harmful fashions. Looking back on the twentieth century, there are times when I think the Church of England should have changed less. What concerns me more in my daily work is the way our churches tolerate gossip and grumbling – behaviours which are acid to Christian virtue. We are also slow to notice how we harm each other, and slow to offer meaningful a meaningful apology. Without realising it, we often carry on doing our thing in a way that leaves new or difficult characters isolated and ignored. Without ever saying it, we “encourage” seekers to move on rather than engaging in good wholesome conflict.

All of this is material for good growth. One thing parish churches have always had is time: and with time comes the opportunity (if not the will) to patiently do the groundwork. Between us, and with the help of God, our church community can become a place worth inviting people into.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.