

ON SMALL AND LARGE THINGS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 17 June 2018

Today's reading from Samuel alerts us to the importance of small things. We heard last week about the establishment of a central government in Israel in the person of Saul. The people had demanded a king and, against the advice of Samuel, had persisted. Saul, the chosen king, while competent in some ways, was, overall, unsatisfactory. It also appears that Saul may have been mentally ill, possibly with bipolar disorder.

Although the politics of all this are unclear, Samuel goes in search of a new king to replace Saul. The narrative is designed to absolve David, the successful candidate, of participation in a conspiracy to unseat the king. He is portrayed as a pawn in the designs of God. In addition, David is portrayed as the least likely candidate amongst Jesse's sons. From a position of weakness, he is chosen to succeed the great. This impression is confirmed by the encounter between David and the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath, who stood between two and three metres in height.² The smaller and apparently weaker youth confronts the mighty and succeeds.

We don't need at this stage to follow David's subsequent career with its ultimate tragedies, although we could note that he also became corrupted by the kingly power that he wielded. It is sufficient for this morning's purposes to note the proposition that God brings down the mighty and exalts the lowly, as the *Magnificat*³ reminds us.

This theme is continued in this morning's gospel reading.⁴ I want to concentrate on verses 30-34 of Mark 5, where Jesus talks about the mustard seed and its development into a great tree. Let's first think about the mustard seed. This plant, *sinapsis negra*, was prevalent in Palestine; so prevalent as to be a weed. Nevertheless, it was widely regarded for its medicinal properties. The Roman author, Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, said that mustard

... is ranked by Pythagoras among the very first of those plants the pungency of which mounts upwards; for there is none to be found more penetrating to the brain and nostrils.

Pounded with vinegar, mustard is employed as a liniment for the stings of serpents and scorpions, and it effectually neutralizes the poisonous properties of fungi. ... Mustard is chewed for tooth-ache, and ... is very beneficial, also, for all maladies of the stomach.⁵

The seed of mustard is very small, giving rise to the comments that Jesus makes about such a small beginning producing a very large outcome. But, before we look any further at this, I want to move to verses 33 and 34 of our gospel reading:

¹ Readings: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

² 1 Samuel 17. Interestingly, this story introduces David afresh, as if today's reading was not there. We can infer from this that the Goliath account is from a source independent of David's anointing by Samuel.

³ Luke 1:46-55

⁴ I have relied significantly on Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 383-387

⁵ Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD), *Natural History*, Book 20.87

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D20%3Achapter%3D87#note1>

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

What's going on here? Why does Jesus restrict his direct explanations to his closest associates? Why not tell everyone? It seems that Jesus not only intended his public hearers to get the message without it being clearly explained, he also thought that they would get it. In that case, the message itself was dangerous; Jesus was speaking in such a way as to avoid a head-on collision with the public authorities and confining his direct explanation to a close circle. With this in mind, we can return to the story of the mustard seed.

When we come to planting seeds, we also come to the Jewish purity laws. These laws sought to bring order into a disorderly world. One way of doing this was to link like with like. Thus, it was forbidden to weave a cloth from different kinds of fibre: for example, vegetable fibres such as flax or cotton, with animal fibres such as lambs' wool. Similarly, prawns could not be eaten because, although water-living, they also had legs, which were proper to land animals. Mustard could not be sown in a vegetable garden because it was not a vegetable, like a bean. Rather, it was a shrub. Of course, there may have been other reasons for not planting mustard in a garden. It propagated itself very successfully and could take over the garden in the same way as any aggressive weed. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that nobody in that culture would plant mustard.

Since, however, mustard grew wild, everyone knew what it looked like when full grown. It grew into a small shrub of about 1.5m high. For Jesus to say that it became the greatest of all shrubs, with large branches sufficient to harbour bird nests, was simply wrong. It was so wrong that every listener would have smiled, the exaggeration was so extreme. The tree described by Jesus implied a comparison with the greatest local trees, that is, the cedars of Lebanon.

In Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 31, such great trees represent oppressive imperial governments. In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree and Daniel interprets the tree as his empire, which will one day be struck down. Ezekiel 31 has a similar account of the destruction of the great tree that was the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Those who heard Jesus' words would have made the connection between the small and rejected people of Israel, the mustard seeds, and their current oppression by the Romans, the great tree. But Jesus was also referring to another account of the growth of a tree, this time in Ezekiel 17, where the Lord creates his own tree that overcomes the tree of Pharaoh and of the Babylonian ruler.⁶

Now we can understand why this message was so dangerous. The Romans were aware of the possibility of insurrection in their province of Judea. On the death of King Herod the Great in 4 BC, there was a revolt in Judea that was put down with great severity.⁷ At the time of the birth of Jesus, the taxation of the province under Quirinius, which is mentioned in Luke 2, caused a revolt led by Judas of Galilee.⁸ A further series of revolts was begun in about 66 AD and led to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.⁹ The Romans were right to take seditious talk seriously.

⁶ See James Alison, *Raising Abel*, New York, Crossroad Herder, 2002, p. 85

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 10. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=J.%20AJ>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judas_of_Galilee

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_wars

Jesus intended his hearers to understand, and explained directly to his close associates, that he was bringing in a new kingdom. Although his view of that kingdom was not the one feared by the Romans, he nevertheless ran a great risk, as subsequent events showed. Mark is quite clear that even Jesus' own inner group thought the same as the Romans. Jesus preached a message that was intrinsically counter cultural and interpreted by others as seditious.

In addition, Mark was writing, around 70 AD, to the small Christian community in Rome after the martyrdoms of Saints Peter and Paul. Those martyrdoms were part of the persecution by Nero, when Christians became the scapegoats for the fire that destroyed parts of the city. This community lived at the heart of the oppression to which the parable of the mustard seed referred. Whatever was taking place when Jesus actually spoke, Mark's gospel was written to encourage and support those who now belonged to the church. In this case, our gospel reading offered assurance to a group who found themselves a small minority and who knew the reality of persecution at first hand.¹⁰

What are we to make of all this? The circumstances of this parable and its inclusion in Mark's gospel stand in stark contrast to the position of those who complain that Christians are being persecuted in societies such as ours. Christians are persecuted in parts of the world, but not here.

Nevertheless, the concept of being a minority is very real for us. Just as the original hearers of the parable and the early readers of Mark needed support and encouragement, so do we. Yet the encouragement we find is not that Christians will one day resume their rightful place in the world. It is that the kingdom of God is in God's hands, not ours. It is God's seed and God's kingdom. We should accept the assurance that the parable of the mustard seed gives us.

The question we face is the same as that facing the original hearers: whether or not we choose the kingdom of God over against the kingdom of the world. If we choose God, we may seem to be weeds, out of place as we try to live for forgiveness and inclusion.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote a prayer for Epiphany that is relevant to today's gospel:

On Epiphany day,
we are still the people walking.
We are still people in the dark,
and the darkness looms large around us,
beset as we are by fear,
anxiety,
brutality,
violence,
loss—
a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.
We are—we could be—people of your light.
So we pray for the light of your glorious presence
as we wait for your appearing;
we pray for the light of your wondrous grace
as we exhaust our coping capacity;
we pray for your gift of newness that

¹⁰ John R Donahue and Daniel J Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Sacra Pagina series) Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 2002, pp. 41-46

will override our weariness;
we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust
in your good rule.
That we may have energy, courage, and freedom to enact
your rule through the demands of this day.
We submit our day to you and to your rule, with deep joy and high hope.¹¹

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GoodShepherdLexington/posts/650017198473743>