

Sermon 17 August 2025 Growing God's Kingdom (First Sunday in new church)

Acts 1:6-11 Mark 4:26-32

I want to begin by just making a point – over the past months (let's make that years!), I have often, understandably, referred to our dream of not just building a new church and community centre, but of making a contribution towards the growing of God's kingdom here in Flat Bush. In the end, that is the motivation behind this project, and of course, is the underlying theme of today's service. It follows, therefore, that for some of you who have managed to sit through most or some of my sermons, there will be elements of what I am about to say that you just might have heard before. I make no apologies for that. If we think a message is important, and I do happen to think this message of growing God's kingdom is important, then that message is worth repeating.

So, let's have a look at our gospel reading, and in particular, Jesus comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed: *'Jesus said, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? It is like a mustard seed planted in the ground."*' Mark 4:30. Once again, we see the ability of Jesus to use story-telling to make a point, and as is inevitably the case, he makes several points with just one short story.

The first point I want to highlight is the fact that Jesus actually uses story-telling. That's how he taught, and for very good reason. We enjoy stories and so we remember stories. So, I make no apologies for using stories, and you will hear a couple over the next fifteen minutes!

Before we explore the messages contained in this story, can I just clarify what we mean by 'the Kingdom of God.' I could devote a whole sermon to this but, as you would have heard from me before, for our purposes it means a society, a community where people live in harmony, acknowledging God and caring for one another, in other words, carrying out Jesus' commandments to love God and love our neighbour. Let's keep it simple. It is also a community in which we share our relationship with God and with Christ. I quote from our first reading: *'And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me.'* Acts 1:8.

The next message is contained in the next sentence: *'It is the smallest of seeds, but it becomes the largest of all garden plants.'* Mark 4:31. As I have so often said, this state of affairs, this environment is created by you and me doing our little bit, and if we all buy into that, then the sum total will be very significant.

I remind you of the true story of a 12 year old boy in America who some years ago heard about the hospital Dr Albert Schweitzer was building in Africa, and apparently he needed supplies. The boy went to his piggy bank, tipped out his money, which came to a couple of dollars. He went to the local pharmacy and bought a packet of aspirin. He then rang the US air force and asked if the next time they were flying over Africa, would they mind dropping off his packet of aspirin to Dr Schweitzer's hospital.

It so happened that the local radio station heard about the boy's request and so they broadcasted the story. Radio stations across the country picked up on the story and people began to contribute themselves to the point where the air force did drop off the boy's packet of aspirin, along with tons and tons of medical equipment, worth millions of dollars in today's terms. I believe they took the boy along for the ride as well.

This all happened because a 12 year old boy thought he could make a difference. We must never ever think that our contribution, no matter how small, won't make a difference, because if we all think that way, then nothing will ever happen, and the world will definitely not become a better place. Mahatma Ghandi said, *'In a gentle way, you can shake the world.'*

And remember this, everything has to begin somewhere. There is that well-known proverb that says, *'From small beginnings come great things.'* This highlights the power of perseverance and the potential for growth and success that can arise from the smallest of steps.

The next two messages emanate from the next verse: *'It grows long branches, and the birds can make nests in its shade.'* Mark 4:32. Firstly, there is a message around diversity here. It is common when travelling in Palestine to see large flocks of birds in these mustard trees. Apart from anything else, they are attracted by the seeds. And these flocks are made up of a wide variety of birds, all different types of birds. Jesus is making the point that God's kingdom is made up of a wide diversity of

constituents, people of every disposition, culture and even conviction. Some of you have heard me say this before, but Jesus' commandment 'to love our neighbour' carries no qualification or exception. He did not say 'love your neighbour as long as he or she looks like you, behaves like you, thinks like you.' It is us who have introduced those qualifications. We live in a very diverse community and I am so very happy that our St Paul's community reflects that diversity.

The second message contained in this verse is this: the birds feel at home in these trees, they feel comfortable, they feel sheltered. The Kingdom of God is a community where people feel cared for and valued. In simple terms, that is the essence of love as determined in the Christian sense, as conveyed in Jesus' commandment 'to love our neighbour.'

I believe that the mustard tree in this parable actually symbolises God's church. The church provides nurture and comfort to its diverse flock, in this case, the birds. And this is where we come in. In the end, the church is about people. It is people that enable a church to function. It is people that spread God's love. It is people that ensure a church is a church of purpose and action. Yes, we gather here for worship, but that worship is valueless if it doesn't translate into service for others.

Some of you might remember the story of the woman who was very religious and devout and filled with the love of God. Each morning she would go to church. And on her way children would call out to her, beggars would accost her, but so immersed was she in her devotions that she did not see or hear them.

One day, she walked down the street in her customary manner and arrived at the church just in time for the service. She pushed the door but it would not open. She pushed again harder, but the door was firmly locked. Distressed at the thought that she would miss her religious service for the first time in years and not knowing what to do, she looked up. And there right before her face, she found a note pinned to the door. It said, *I'm out there!*

What takes place in this place of worship should be a sounding board for what we do out there, in our community. And what takes place out there should be an expression of what takes place in here. That, my friends, is precisely why we have built a community centre as part of our church complex.

I want to finish by making one last point. It has been quite a journey getting to this point, and I am sure most of you are aware of that. So in one sense, this is the end of a journey and we celebrate that and all those who have made this journey possible. However, in another sense it is just the beginning of a new journey. If we are to do justice to this wonderful complex, and most importantly what takes place in this new place of worship, then this is the beginning of a journey that will call for commitment, endeavour and enthusiasm as we work towards growing God's kingdom here in Flat Bush. Let me conclude with yet another story.

A martial arts student kneels before a master sensei in a ceremony to receive the hard-earned Black Belt. After years of training, the student has finally reached a pinnacle of achievement in the discipline. The sensei solemnly tells the young man, 'Before granting the black belt, you must pass one more test. 'I'm ready,' responds the student, expecting perhaps one more round of sparring.

'You must answer the essential question: What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' The student replies, 'Why, the end of my journey. A well-deserved reward for my hard work.' The master waits for more. Clearly, he is not satisfied. He finally speaks, 'You are not ready for the Black Belt. Return in one year.'

A year later, the student kneels before the master again, and again he is asked the question, 'What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' 'It is a symbol of distinction and the highest achievement in our art,' the young man replies. Again, the master waits for more. Still unsatisfied, he says once more, 'You are not ready to receive the Black Belt. Return in one year.'

A year later, the student again kneels before the master and hears the question, 'What is the true meaning of the Black belt?' This time he answers, 'The Black Belt represents not the end, but the beginning of a never-ending journey of discipline, work and pursuit of an even higher standard.' 'Yes,' replies the master, 'you are now ready to receive the Black Belt and begin your work.'

My friends, that is exactly where we are today, and I am so looking forward to it.