

“You are the Kingdom!” Mark 4:26-34

“And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our meditations we have two of Jesus’ so-called “Kingdom parables”. What do they teach? The first one teaches that the Kingdom of God grows on its own, even without us knowing or being able to notice it. It will keep growing until she reaches full maturity and then ... the Harvest Day, the Last Day comes.

The second teaches about the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom of God. It begins as the smallest of all seeds, as mustard seed, but when it grows, it grows much larger than any garden plants, much larger than any human organization.

Today I invite you to meditate on two questions. **First**, what is this Kingdom of God and how does it grow? And then, **second**, how correct is that depiction given by Jesus in the parable of mustard seed?

So, what is this Kingdom of God? When we hear the word “kingdom”, for many it invokes the picture of a geographical entity, like a territory ruled by some royalty. Biblically speaking, a much better translation would be the “Reign and Rule of God”, because that is what Jesus is talking about. About God the Almighty breaking into our reality, breaking into our history and launching His eternal reign among us.

But how does He do it? How does He reign and rule among us? How does He build and expand His Kingdom? Two millennia ago, it happened through His Son Jesus Christ. Something far beyond our comprehension took place in a remote place in Galilee during the heydays of the Roman Empire.

God the Creator became a creature... **The eternal Word became flesh!** Regardless of how many times we repeat this, we can’t grasp the magnitude of this event. The Eternal Creator bound Himself to His creation! Forever!

In our Lutheran tradition we emphasise the death and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of His mission. Christians in the Eastern Orthodox tradition pay much more attention to the Incarnation of Jesus and what it means for us.

One of the Trinity became human, and now through Him humanity has been welcomed into the loving fellowship with God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is one of those divine mysteries, which we can ponder our entire lives.

Thus, two millennia ago the Triune God broke into our reality through Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God was among us. But it didn't stop with that, or we could say that it didn't even start with that.

The way the Triune God has been reigning among us and building His Kingdom is by means of His Word and His Spirit. By speaking His life-giving Word which always comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am not sure how we could imagine or picture the working of God's Reign and Rule, but today's parable is quite helpful. The Triune God is that man in this parable who tirelessly scatters the seed of the Word of the Gospel.

Similarly, as in the famous passage from Isaiah where the Gospel message is compared to the rain and snow that does not return without accomplishing its purpose, the same way the spoken Word of the Lord never returns empty.

Now, when Jesus ascended back to the Father, He left someone else to continue His work of bringing forth His Reign and Rule? Who did He leave in His place? Who did He entrust this magnificent responsibility to?

To His Church, yes! To His body. To you! As Jesus Himself was bringing forth the Reign and Rule of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, so now He has given the same powerful Spirit to His body, the Christian Church, to each one of you!

Whenever you speak the message of Jesus, whenever you call people to repentance and proclaim them the Gospel, that we are all reconciled with the Triune God, that all our sins, rebellion and foolishness are forgiven because of what Jesus did, that now God the Father looks at us as His beloved children – whenever you deliver this message, the Holy Spirit accompanies your words and He brings God's Reign and Rule to those who receive our message. And then incredible things happen.

Jesus' words are the Spirit and life, for the life-creating Spirit always accompanies them. When these words reach the hearts of our listeners, the seed is sown. If our listeners don't reject the gift of the Holy Spirit, that seed begins to grow in them, and will continue to grow until the day of the Final Harvest.

Can you see the greatness of our calling as Christians? Jesus has entrusted to us the words of eternal life! When you speak these words in the power of the Holy Spirit, who also dwells in you, you can give your fellow humans the gift of eternal life.

If they receive our message, if they are humble enough to listen as the Triune God speaks through us, then from our lips they will receive the priceless treasures of all their sins forgiven, of God's love and affection and eternal life with Him.

This is how the Kingdom grows. Through us. As you speak. As you send forth the Holy Spirit to scatter the seed. This is us. This is our mission. This is our privilege to participate in the Reign and Rule of our Triune God. Do we appreciate and rejoice in this amazing calling as we should? Do we gladly embrace it?

But... these parables also teach us some other aspects of the Reign and Rule of our God. We are called and sent to scatter the seed. But most of the time it is very hard to see what difference our scattering of the Word makes.

Too often it seems that the words that we have spoken bounce back without any impact. Sometimes it may be true. But even when that happens, the Word still accomplishes its purpose. True. Every time someone rejects God's gentle invitation to return to Him, every such time will serve as their accusation on the Last Day, as a testimony to the hardness of their hearts and to the grace and mercy of our Lord.

But even when people receive the Word, even then we can't exactly see much happening. We can't see the seed growing into blade, and then ear and then into full grain. It takes time, and our God doesn't give His glory to others. That is His work, that is His Reign, that is Him who creates and nourished that new life.

This much on what this Kingdom of God is and how it grows. **Now a little bit on the second question – how correct is the depiction of God's Kingdom given by Jesus in the parable of mustard seed?** What do I mean by this?

Jesus speaks about this tiny seed which then grows into this great tree. Is this your experience with the Church? Is that how you see the Church growing? Is that how you see this congregation growing? Or the LCA? Or the Church in Australia?

It may appear that Jesus has gotten it wrong. Much of our experience tells us that the Church is shrinking, not growing. It may have resembled a bigger tree a while ago, but today it is becoming more and more like a mustard seed again.

That is how we perceive it through our senses. But that is not how our Triune God sees His Beloved Bride, the Temple of His Spirit, His Spiritual House built of living stones. This is not how Jesus sees you.

On the one hand, sure, the Church as the Kingdom of God is always like that little mustard seed. It was true beginning with Jesus' own ministry. There was **"no form or majesty when people looked at Him"**. The same was true of His disciples.

The same has been true of His Beloved Bride, the true Church, the true believers for the most of history. We always appear small and insignificant in the eyes of this world. There is no splendour, not attraction... just a little, somewhat odd seed.

How does this make us feel? Isn't that a bit disappointing when we look at our fellow-saints, and we are just a bunch of ordinary people, most of us not much valued or adored in the eyes of the world. No glory, no splendour.

Some may feel sad. Some may feel a bit ashamed to be a part of such a strange community. Some may want to do whatever we can to look better in the eyes of the world, to do whatever it takes, so that only the world would smile at us.

But just remember Jesus' words: **"You will be hated by all for my name's sake."** (Mat 10:22) So, how should we think about the Church, about this strange and often despised Kingdom of God? Should we feel a bit embarrassed, should we try to please the world, should we leave our gatherings altogether for something more glorious?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, if only we could see the Church as it is just for a moment, just for a brief moment as it was revealed to John, the beloved disciple of Jesus: **"Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"** (Rev 7:9-10) And you among them!

The Gordon-Conwell Seminary in the US runs the Centre for Global Christianity. They gather data world-wide and they analyse the trends of global Christianity, or we could say – they try to see how the Reign and Rule of God is spreading across the globe.

That is amazing and bordering with the unbelievable! Do you know how many new Christians in average every day are brought into the Kingdom of God, into our Church, to be your brothers and sisters and to rejoice and celebrate with us forever?

Can you even guess? The estimate is ... that the Holy Spirit brings in average 50.000 new Christians into Christ church every day! 50.000! Since the beginning of our service at least 1000 new brothers and sisters have been brought into the divine fellowship with the Father and the Son and with you! Just think about that! You will meet them!

That is what the Reign of God looks like. That is what the divine community to which we are privileged to belong truly is like. This great, magnificent tree that grows and grows and grows across time and space and becomes infinitely larger than any other garden plant ... and there is a place for everyone.

And you... you are a manifestation of this resplendent community! If there is any place in the world to be, this is it! If there is any community worth belonging to, this is it! If there are great future promises, that is here, in Christ's Church.

Where He Himself, God who is your Father gathers us through His Son Jesus, bringing us together by the power of His Holy Spirit so that He can be with us and bless us. Where the Reign of God breaks into our reality, where the heavens and the earth meet, where our God Himself provides for us the medicine of resurrection, His holy body and blood, for the forgiveness of all our sins. All of that is here... for you!

This much for today, to ponder on the incredible grace that we have received. May the Holy Spirit fill you with joy and gratitude that Jesus has chosen you, you of all people! to be with Him and with His divine family forever. Rejoice and be grateful! Amen.