

June 17, 2012

## **The Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector*

### **The Mustard Seed**

A parable is a bit like a joke. Like a joke, a parable depends upon cultural norms and common associations that have to be assumed—twists and turns, reversals and unexpected outcomes that make the punch line, well... punchy. Like a joke, it is especially hard for the humor or the point to transcend time and circumstance. It is amazing that we can still laugh at some of Shakespeare's jokes without someone explaining them to us, but other examples of jokes that are still in circulation across centuries are few and far between.

Without commentary, we simply miss the point of the parable of the mustard seed. It is pretty clear that even Mark has changed what the seed grows into from a tree in earlier versions of the story to "the greatest of all shrubs." Obviously mustard seeds don't grow into trees, but that is part of the absurdity, the joke.

Generally when the people who first heard this parable about birds nesting in branches, they would have thought of a great cedar. The home of my teenage years had a large lawn anchored by three magnificent cedars of Lebanon. At that point in my life I had not seen a redwood forest but these trees are without doubt some of the most magnificent in the world. They are the kind we hear about in Ezekiel. "Thus says the Lord: I will plant a lofty and noble cedar... in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind."<sup>1</sup> Here he is prophesying the restoration of a great kingdom of Israel. Elsewhere the prophet has used the image of birds nesting in the branches of a great tree to refer to Egypt and Assyria,<sup>2</sup> and in other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures the image is also used to refer to the Babylonian Empire.<sup>3</sup> Anyone listening to Jesus talk about birds nesting in branches would know that he is talking Empire. With what can we compare the kingdom or empire or reign or rulership or dominion of God? The empire of God is like a mustard plant, a generally unwanted, common weed that sprouts up all over the place. It gets out of control. It undermines good order and is something that in general the powers-that-be would like to be rid of. *There* the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. The Kingdom or Empire of God, in contrast to other Empires—Rome—or kingdoms—Israel—does not need to be a mighty anything. It would be as if the bird on the ceremonial staffs leading the armies was a pigeon rather than an eagle. Is there any bird less magnificent and more annoying than a pigeon? As so often with Jesus' parables, he is poking fun at human pretension, especially when it gets in the way of full and abundant life for everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezek 17:22-23

<sup>2</sup> Ezek 31:2-6

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 4:10-12

This parable pokes fun at any pretensions we might have as a church. This coming Tuesday I will be at a meeting of what is really a 'blue sky' committee of the board of trustees of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. I've been invited to the group after it has already done some substantial work about the state of the church, statistics and projections about what kind of numbers of clergy and even what kind of clergy the church is going to need in the future. All this leads to questions of what a University-related seminary should be about in the future? What does it mean to have an educated leadership for the church? These are good questions and I'm looking forward to the conversation, but I will worry if the real agenda seems to be about strengthening the claims to superiority of the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion. In other words I will worry if the agenda is more about the church than it is about the gospel.

In many ways our building, our vestments, our prayer books and hymnals reveal many trappings of Empires past. Our vestments are essentially what one friend of mine called 'roman underwear' with stoles and the like which originally suggested status. A prelate's purple was the color of power when purple cloth was among the most expensive to produce. Our steeple was designed to make the church the most visible building around. Our prayers are full of concern for the nation, for those who govern, that were in the old days prayers for the sovereign. Visit churches in England and you will often see partially burned flags from various military campaigns hanging around the walls. Visit an Anglican Cathedral in Africa and you will find these trappings of empire have become merged with old systems and sensibilities of tribal leadership. I'm not saying that we should therefore change all these things, nor am I saying they are particularly sacred. I'm recognizing in hindsight some of the pretensions of the past and wondering what it is that we miss in the present. When I see our brothers in England huffing and puffing about marriage or our Roman brethren here getting all bent out of shape about how their convictions are not being taken seriously in the public square, I think about the mustard seed and give thanks that I do not have to get all bent out of shape and anxious and fearful and deadly, deadly serious just because I disagree with these claims to something like empire or dominion.

And that is what the gospel does: it liberates us from fear and anxiety, from the burden of our sins, from getting bent out of shape and becoming deadly serious and the like, all through reminding us that we are really and truly beloved of God and that God desires that we live as people so beloved that we can live in the kind of communities in which the widow and the orphan, the weak and the broken can find a place where everyone hears the good news of God's love for them.

You might remember the parable of the leaven which makes the same point. The Empire of God is like yeast which a woman (a woman of all things being essential to the Kingdom of God?)—yeast which a woman took and mixed into a huge quantity of flour until it was all leavened.<sup>4</sup> Once again Heaven's imperial rule is unlike the rule of Rome or the rule of the Temple. It is not about the purity of unleavened bread but about the pervasiveness of God's love affecting and infecting everything, celebrating the stuff of

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:33 and parallels

life in all its forms, especially those declared beyond the pale by the powers of this world. A man who has done a lifetime of work studying the parables tells of a student of his who translated the parable of the leaven this way: "God's overwhelming love is like a cancer that invaded a woman's breast until it had consumed all of her, even in her Sunday finery." Bernard Brandon Scott says "it is just as difficult to conceive God's love as breast cancer as it is the empire of God as leaven (or indeed, he might have added, a kudzu-like weed.) The student was dying of breast cancer and remarked that her form of the parable had finally allowed her to see that God was on her side, even in her battle with cancer."<sup>5</sup>

In a time of silence for prayer I invite you to think about whatever it is that makes you anxious or gets you bent out of shape (especially in this season of electoral politics with this or that message bombarding us everywhere we turn) and see whether a spirit of playfulness that is the basis of good parables can free you for love in the assurance that you, all of you, are beloved, even with all your pretensions. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray....

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Polebridge, 2001) p.34