

'Fan into a flame the gift you've been given.'

Jesus' method of teaching through the parables is one of the most striking things in all the scriptures, so authentic - you can feel them as fresh as they were rung out originally. It's a tremendous way of teaching, and the early Church often did this too. The real issue with the parables was that, except in His stories, Jesus was often giving a straight contrast - on the one hand you've got this, and then you get that; and leaving the picture, the image to the hearer to interpret. That's what keeps them so fresh.

So of course, in this one about the mustard seed, we've got the seed sown, and the farmer sleeps, and then suddenly he's got a crop. That's what the kingdom of God is like. I must admit I'm not very agricultural, but Father Mark left me a garden that I have to water, and I must admit it is amazing sometimes. One night I went to bed and the next morning all the rhododendrons were flowering, and you go, "Wow!" They just did it like magic in the night, it's so visual. The same idea with this mustard seed - an image of faith planted in us at our baptism. The contrast here of course is now on the size that faith, or of the kingdom, it starts off very tiny, but it grows and develops and makes extensions to the point where others can bask in its shade.

The parables are rather unique, and if you look at the writings of other faiths, and I'm not calling any other religion - the Buddhists have some clever stuff - but read any other scriptures and you'll be hard pressed to find teaching like this. The powerful thing for me, always with the parables, is you can take these parables and talk about the mission of the Church, and the mission of spreading the gospel. Jesus certainly wanted His disciples and apostles to know that the preaching of the good news, the sowing of faith was like this parable - like a seed given to someone. The Church has always thought along these lines, that's why we baptize infants, because of the faith of one or more parents. A baptism for an infant is only a seed. It will not blossom into anything, and will lay dormant if faith isn't included in the ingredients.

For those who are here in church today, I always feel we need to apply the parables to ourselves, and especially our inward selves. Let these parables come alive for you - your faith is like a seed that's been sown - nurture it through the sacraments, let it grow through God's grace - there are harvests to be reaped through this seed of faith in your own life.

Indeed, you might feel your faith is very small, but in times of necessity it might be that you do have branches and strength for others to shelter in, in their lack of faith, or their doubt, or their necessity, or lack of strength. I always think that you can't begin to see the truth of that unless you see the grace of God. As Saint John says, "Focus on the love that the Father has lavished on you by letting you be called a child of God." It's got to start with love of self. If you have no love of self, no belief that you are unique and the creation of God, then the

heart isn't big enough to take the gift of faith seriously and let it grow.

Here's an important truth to take on board - God does not create rubbish with any human being. We look around at people sometimes don't we and we can think, "Oh, they're dastardly." But the truth is they turn into that, they weren't born like that. Nobody was born problematic, literally. Every human being was created for glory and that's the wonder - the beginning - that you and me are created for glory and that God loves you with an infinite love beyond all telling. Once you take that truth on board in your prayer life, then these parables can come alive.

In other words, God has given you a seed that's growing in your heart that will yield a harvest. That seed, that gift of faith, might only start off small, like the mustard seed, but that great gift in you is meant to grow big with branches that shelter others, and all that starts with an understanding and a belief in God's grace to you and for you - grace that feeds and strengthens you, that you might feed and strengthen one another.



