

An invasive weed

Mark 4:26-34

Isn't it amazing how a tiny seed contains all the information needed to turn into a towering jarrah tree? It starts off not even as the nut, but a flake that can blow in the wind and be distributed to new spaces and grow into a new, towering tree, making new forests, and reaching the skies where it lands.

The mustard seed is quite a bit bigger, but was small in comparison with other seeds that people would have thought about in Jesus' day. They would have been aware of the seeds of wheat and barley. Or the olive encased in its fruit with a relatively large stone. While by our standards, the mustard seed is not particularly small, it would have been quite small compared to the other seeds that people knew about back then.

However, even by the standards of the day it did not grow into a large tree. The cedars of Lebanon were famed for their height and straightness, functioning in those early years much the same as jarrah functioned in our society in the early years of colonisation. Cedars were for building important buildings. They were expensive, especially when they had to be imported. Moreover, they were among the tallest trees known to that society. It is easy to see why the cedar was the symbol of an empire in all its grandeur.

The mustard seed, on the other hand, hardly grew into a tree at all. In Australian lingo, we might call it a shrub or bush. It would hardly stand waist high to an adult – and was anything but the symbol of an empire in majestic beauty. Using it as a symbol of the reign of God is something that was undermining the traditional concepts of what that would look like.

However, there is another important element to the mustard bush being a symbol of God's reign. The mustard bush was a weed! When we think about the prickly pear that decimated Australian paddocks in the earlier part of last century, we get something of an idea what it was like. Getting mustard seeds into the field could devastate a farm. Imagine ploughing and trying to grow crops around an invasive weed. It might be nice for cooking, but hopeless for a farmer. No one in their right mind would deliberately sow a mustard seed.

In our modern city lives, we love the birds of the air. They are a sign of a healthy environment and their song is a joy to hear above the city noises. In Jesus' day, many birds would be a pest to the farmers. They would eat the crops and leave less for the farmers to sell or feed their families. The birds of the air certainly were a bit of a problem.

Let's put this parable into Australian terms and take a moment to think about what you hear when it is read this way:

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like the seed of an invasive weed, which, when sown upon the ground, only looks small, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes a shrub, spreading everywhere, sheltering the animals that would eat the crops.”

That almost sounds like an offensive description of the reign of God. How can it be an invasive weed? There's a few things that Jesus is saying in this parable, and there is no surprise it comes not long after the conflicts with the Pharisees over how to keep the Torah. There is also no surprise this Gospel was written in the build up to one of

the biggest disasters in Jewish history – the siege of Jerusalem. And so we get two affirmations from the author of Mark.

The reign of God is not a political thing. Throughout church history we can see what happens when people try to implement what they think of as the reign of God in their locality. People experience spiritual abuse for being different, autocrats come into power supported by a (false) theological justification, and the experience is anything but the reign of God.

However, this does not mean that we just let injustices occur, because the reign of God is like an invasive weed. Once we let it in, it spreads everywhere – just ask any farmer who has had to deal with weeds. It spreads as we share hope, love, and grace as Jesus did. It spreads in a way that challenges traditional power structures, and the usual way of thinking about who is “in” and who is “out.” It spreads through the winds of the blowing Spirit, breathing the breath of God, filling those who respond with a fullness of life. It spreads through communities that practice Jesus’ radical and all-inclusive love.

Where will this weed invade our community? Will we ignore it, try to root it out, or will we be part of its spreading? And will we have the confidence that as we participate in the reign of God, there will be growth even when we feel it is strangling the traditions that tell us where to expect seeing it. Will we let the mustard seed grow?