

Mark 4:21-34

Parables of the Kingdom

Introduction

I'm not sure if pastors are supposed to like detective stories but I quite like the program *Death in Paradise* which is set in the Caribbean. In *Death in Paradise*, like many crime mysteries, there is normally some secret to solving the murder. "No, you're not Mary Jane, Mary Jane's dead and you're actually her sister. You killed your husband so that you could live with your dead sister's husband who you've always secretly loved."

Alright, I'm not taking up novel writing any time soon (I'll leave that to Evangeline), but as I was reading through these parables I was thinking about detective stories and how they often use that idea of a secret insight (particularly one hidden in plain sight) to bring understanding.

While I know it's not the done thing in detective mysteries, I'll give you a spoiler for today's message. We're going to build on what we were looking at last week and see that Jesus is the one who brings light and understanding. We're also going to see that there is more going on than what we're often aware and that there is a big impact coming despite an apparently insignificant start.

Light Will Shine (vv. 21-25)

So let's look at this first little parable about a lamp being put on a lamp stand. Many of us will automatically think that this parable relates to us because it is so similar to Matthew 5:14-16. On that occasion Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

However, here in Mark's Gospel it doesn't appear to be about us but rather about Jesus. Just as detectives look for a key to bring understanding and solve a murder mystery, here Jesus is the key which brings understanding of this and all parables. Last week we heard how Jesus had said to his disciples, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables [...]" This sentiment is repeated at the end of this little collection of parables in verses 33 and 34, "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he

explained everything.” So we know that secret of the kingdom of God is Jesus’ presence and it is Jesus who gives understanding as to the meaning of parables, but why do I think that this parable is specifically about Jesus?

The first reason I think that this parable is about Jesus is because when Jesus asks, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?” We get the idea of a passive lamp being brought in by a buyer but a better translation would be, “Does a lamp come in to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, the lamp is put on its stand?” What on earth is a lamp doing coming in by itself? We’ve jumped from murder mysteries to Disney’s *Fantasia*! This lamp is active and enters, the question becomes will we willingly allow the lamp to do its job of revealing things or not. This helps us understand why Jesus goes on to say, “For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.” Jesus is the light who is going to shine the light of God’s truth into our lives. Will we receive this examination (even if it may be painful)? Will we hear the truth that Jesus speaks into our lives?

The second reason I think this parable is about Jesus is because of the importance that Jesus gives to listening to him, almost giving a warning here. “‘Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.’” The expression, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more,” is normally used in relation to generosity and giving but here it is in relation to how carefully people listen to Jesus. If people listen willingly, in an open-hearted and humble way, then they will indeed receive so much more, whereas if people hear the stories without really listening or wanting to come to Jesus, then even the little understanding they may have will be taken away from them.

There is a simple but not easy challenge for us in hearing this parable. Will we genuinely listen to Jesus? Are we willing to come to Jesus humbly and let him set the direction and priorities for our lives? Do we see in Jesus the key to understanding the message of the Bible and the kingdom of God so that we read the Bible as predominantly about Jesus and not firstly about us, as if we’re the centre of attention?

We Do Our Part Because God Will Do His (vv. 26-29)

Let's continue on with the parables we're looking at today and we read the parable of the growing seed. "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces corn – first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

I wonder if Jesus told this parable because one of his disciples made a comment along the lines of, "We get it! You're bringing in the kingdom of God! But what's happening? You've been telling these parables and we've been telling people about you but there's not a lot going on. Surely we need to be doing more than just sowing God's word as you put it?"

I think this is one of the most common challenges for the church today. "Come on! What's the silver bullet? What's the magic ingredient? How do you get a church to grow? We're telling people about Jesus but there doesn't seem to be a lot going on. Maybe we should try something else?"

Jesus tells this little story to tell his disciples to keep doing what they're called to do, the sowing, "A man scatters seed on the ground." The disciples were to do the sowing while keeping the end in view, the harvest, "As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." However, the stuff in the middle is really to be left up to God. There's stuff happening but we won't necessarily see it nor even understand it, "Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces corn – first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

I remember when I was a youth worker in Sydney that one night in the study time we were talking about who Jesus was and what he'd done for us and a young lad there said something along the lines of, "Yes, if you believe that." And that was fine, we had lots of different opinions. A number of years later I was speaking with a small group about how when we struggle with temptation we sometimes resist it and sometimes we sin and I asked what would we do when we fail? This young lad stated simply, "Well, that's why Jesus came and died for us, taking away our sin and giving us new life." I remember thinking, "Wow! You totally get this and trust in it, when did that happen?" The Holy Spirit was working in this young lad's life and moving him from receiving the word as it was sown to fully growing in it and being quite mature in his faith.

I take away three applications from this little parable. First, I am to be patient with others as well as myself. Growth takes time and often the Holy Spirit will be using a

combination of God's word, the wisdom and support of fellow believers, as well as life experiences to bring us to maturity. Second, don't tire of hearing the basics. Yes, we should move from milk to solid food, as the writer of Hebrews put it, but for a Christian solid food is found as we apply the gospel more and more deeply to our lives, not from ignoring the gospel because we think that we're too mature for such simple teaching now. Third, be faithful in sharing the good news of Jesus. Tell people who Jesus is and what he's done and also the difference he's made in your life. This is what we're called as sowers to do and we can do it with confidence that the Holy Spirit will bring growth in his own time.

Kingdom Impact Is Incredible (vv. 30-34)

Having used a parable to describe how God is at work, even when we may not see it, we have a connection with this final little parable, the well known story of the mustard seed. "Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.'"

In this parable the focus is on the contrast between the small size of the mustard seed and the large size of the mustard bush. At it's broadest level this parable describes how the kingdom of God went from coming in Jesus, a comparatively insignificant figure in his day, to now being spread over the world and ultimately will become what is recorded in the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"

It is likely that this broadest meaning is what Jesus had in mind when he was sharing this parable, but sometime people have identified with this story at a very personal level. A person may remember the relatively small (mustard seed sized) act which a Christian did for them which resulted in significant (mustard plant sized) change or impact.

For us here in the Lockyer Valley we have the privilege of being able to read about the growth of the church through history and this can give us comfort that Jesus was true in describing the kingdom of God as being like a mustard tree which had grown from only a small seed. However, there may be times when we feel very small and insignificant.

We're physically dry and maybe we feel spiritually dry at times too. When we feel like this we need to keep God's vision of an abundant harvest and a large and growing tree in our minds. As we keep that in mind, we also remember that it is God who will bring this to pass, it doesn't rely on how good or great we are.

When we keep both God's vision in mind as well trust in his strength and character then we can find shelter in his church like the birds find shelter in the mustard tree. This all helps us to have confidence to keep living for Jesus where he puts us. We may only be able to do little mustard seed actions but we can trust God with the results and it's amazing the growth which the Holy Spirit may bring.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's listen to Jesus' words and open ourselves up to the light he wants to shine into our lives so that we can grow. May we also be patient in desiring this growth both in us and in others, for God is at work even when we can't see or even understand what's happening. And, as we continue to share about Jesus, doing what he has called us to do, may we keep God's great purposes in mind and his great vision for the future when we feel like we or our faith is only the size of a mustard seed.

[pray to close]