

January 19, 2020

Mark 4:1-34

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Book of Mark is most likely the first of the four gospel books to be written, sometime in the late 60s CE. In this season of Epiphany (from Christmas to Lent) we read through the first half of the gospel which focuses around the question of the identity of Jesus. Starting in Chapter 8 the story moves to one of conflict between Jesus and the forces aligned against him.

Today's section is the longest discourse of Jesus in Mark besides that of chapter 13. It's also the portion that immediately precedes Jesus' first trip into Gentile land outside of Israel (chapter 5) which resonates with the contrast of good to bad soil, insiders and outsiders, and darkness to light.

parables in the Ancient World the word designate a mode of speech distinguished by its power to convince. It could be a short saying, proverb or riddle; or an allegory or prophetic oracle. The parables of Jesus are an analogy. The parable story told is about one thing, but actually is talking about something else. Jesus says "the kingdom of God is like..." All of the parables in the today's reading are about agriculture and farming: a man who plants seed in his garden, a man whose garden grows in the day and the night, and a mustard seed. But Jesus isn't teaching the crowds (and us) about better farming techniques.

Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" This invitation is both verbal and visual, it's so important that the audience needs both their sense of sight and sound to take it in.

the secret – or "mystery"

THE KINGDOM OF GOD – *this expression can also be translated as dominion, or empire.* This is the third time that this expression is used in Mark's gospel. The first is in 1:15 when Jesus comes to Galilee and proclaims "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The second is in 3:24 when Jesus responds to accusations that he is controlled by the Devil. "23 And Jesus called them to him. and spoke to them in

¹ Again [Jesus] began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ² He began to teach them many things in *parables*, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." ⁹ And he said, "*Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*"

¹⁰ When [Jesus] was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the *parables*. ¹¹ And he said to them, "To you has been given *the secret of THE KINGDOM OF GOD*, but for those outside, everything comes in *parables*; ¹² in order that

'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

¹³ And he said to them, "Do you not understand this *parable*? Then how will you understand all the *parables*? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the

cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.²⁰ And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

²¹ He said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?²² For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.²³ *Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*”²⁴ And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.²⁵ For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

²⁶ He also said, “**THE KINGDOM OF GOD** is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ [Jesus] also said, “With what can we compare **THE KINGDOM OF GOD**, or what *parable* will we use for it?³¹ It is like **A MUSTARD SEED**, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that **the birds of the air** can make nests in its shade.”

³³ With many such *parables* [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;³⁴ he did not speak to them except in *parables*, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- Which of the parables in today’s reading most grabs you?
- What word, phrase or image shimmers for you?
- What is the parable saying? What it is literally about?
- How is it clear? How is it confusing or inefficient?
- What is it disclosing? About God? About you? about us?
- How or where have you experienced the mystery revealed in the parable in your own life? How do you testify and “sow” that seed in your lifestyle?
- How do you hear an invitation from the Spirit of God to speak, be, act or become in this word?

called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan?²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. – Mark 3:24 Jesus tells these parables in response to the question of the dominion of Satan...is it over? Has Jesus defeated him? Or is Jesus the devil? Here Jesus seems to show what God’s dominion in the world is like....a seed planted in the soil..

30, 60, 100 fold the yield was calculated by comparing the amount of seed sown with that of grain harvested. A typical good harvest would be 7 to 12 fold. This is exaggeratedly fantastic!

A MUSTARD SEED While today we know that this isn’t actually the smallest of all seeds, we often are unaware of what mustard meant in the ancient world. We think of it as a pretty flower planted among the rows of grapes in a vineyard. But in the ancient world mustard was the worst of all garden weeds. Once it sprouted it was impossible to get rid of. Mustard was also a healing agent used to clear up chest congestion: the ancient world’s Vick’s Vapor Rub. It represents both an invasive growth that subverts the original intention of the garden; and a healing power that brings breath and relief where there was none before.