The Parable of the Growing Seed

SUMMARY: There are laws of growth in the spiritual world as well as in the natural world. Our actions and choices have inevitable consequences for the shape of our characters and events in the wider world. But if we do our share in planting the seeds of God’s kingdom, then we can trust him to do the rest and bring it to harvest.

Many people are fearful of the future of the church, fretting about its declining numbers and internal strife. But do we sometimes betray “an irreligious solicitude for God”?

This parable counsels patience: we have to wait for the seed to grow; there is a limit to what we can do to influence the course of events; the seed grows because that is in its nature. Similarly, it is for the worker to do his share and leave the result to God, who gives the increase. The kingdom is a gift of God, in which we have a part to play but in which there are no short cuts.

Yet Jesus shows confidence in the triumph of his cause.

Jesus bids us consider the laws of growth - which exist in the spiritual world as well as in the natural world. The good or evil acts is the root of the good or evil tendency, whose influence spreads until it permeates the whole life, moulding habits of thought and action. As we make small decisions and choices so the steady, silent, inevitable process of change goes on, until we are put to trial over a significant issue and the full grown harvest is displayed. “The truth is that the battle is often won or lost long before it is fought.”

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

SUMMARY: We must have faith in what God can do with our apparently tiny actions and choices.

A true evaluation of something will always ask not only how big is this thing - but also what is its potential?

Jesus here displays his confidence in what he is starting: in time this mustard seed of 12 men will produce a tree that will shelter people of every nation. At the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he left only a handful of followers (one hundred and twenty?), of low collective wealth and social standing - yet two thousand years later the good news has been taken to the far corners of the earth. A few devoted people, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have time and again been the seed of great and surprising developments.

* Hugh Martin, *the Parables of the Gospels*, SCM Press, 1938, p. 81
† Hugh Martin, *the Parables of the Gospels*, SCM Press, 1938, p. 85
The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

SUMMARY: When we make Jesus our king, our lives are transformed. If we are asked to give up everything else for him, then what we get in return is priceless. And we are asked to give up nothing compared with what he has given up for us.

Unless God rules over the hearts of individuals, he can never rule over society. People must enter the kingdom one by one: each must take the oath of allegiance to the king. Having done so, the result is perfect freedom, peace with God, forgiveness, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, goodwill toward men - in short, a treasure for which everything might gladly be given.

We may not be seeking God but he is always seeking us. His kingdom is there to be discovered, even when we least expect it. Many of us stumble across him where previously we have seen only dirt and clay. From St Paul to C. S. Lewis, there are many stories of people whose lives have been transformed, against all their expectations, by the astonishing and unsuspected love of God.

Others are earnestly seeking something - they might look at different religions or philosophies; and they might be distracted by the dirt and rubbish and other extraneous matter with which we, with the pearl in our custody, are sometimes guilty of offering it up.

Wherever we might find it, are we asked to give up everything else in return? A traditional reading of these parables would say so. But consider: “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant . . .” - not “like a pearl”. Like the merchant who finds the pearl, Christ gives up everything to purchase us.

Whatever we are asked to give up, or consider secondary to the kingdom, we can trust that God gives back everything that is worth having - and much, much more. Like the man in the field, who may have walked that way many times before, we won't find God’s kingdom until we are ready, but once we do it will transform our lives and we will value it beyond all else.

The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard

SUMMARY: Our kingdom service is not, thank God, rewarded proportionately. We are to give what we can to his service, freely and gladly, and he gives in return with the generosity of a Father rather than an employer: in accordance with need rather than merit.

In a family, parents give in accordance with need and not with earning capacity - and so it is in God’s kingdom. God does not deal with us on principles of abstract righteousness. If we were to insist on strict justice then none of us should see salvation. All of us will always remain in his debt.

But Christian service is done for the love of it. “The Christian will pity from the bottom of his heart those who have joined his Master’s service only at the eleventh hour and have missed the thrills and strains of a lifetime’s labours.” The reward for faithful service in the kingdom is the opportunity for greater still. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who serves the most.

Hugh Martin, the Parables of the Gospels, SCM Press, 1938, p. 206
The Parable of the Yeast

SUMMARY: If we make Jesus our king in all that we do in the world, then the world will be transformed by the spread of his kingdom.

God’s kingdom is infectious! Like yeast in dough, if we put Christians into the world then they can transform all they touch - good can be contagious, just as evil can. The Gospel is a quickening, transforming force in the world, with the power to change everything.

So why has the church often had so little influence in the world - how is the world so little changed? One reason is that many of us stop the working of the yeast in our own lives after it has got a little way. We don’t want the whole lump to be leavened. Another reason is that the yeast cannot work unless it is actually in the dough: we need to be out there in the world.