

Stories Jesus told: Kingdom growth

Ezekiel 17:22-24 & Luke 13:18-21

Big Idea: God's kingdom starts out small but finishes big.

Purpose: To think about how God's kingdom grows.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father. These are two short parables. But they contain big truths. Be with us now as we study them. Help us to think about how your kingdom grows. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Ole Kirk Christiansen was born in Denmark in 1891. He trained as a carpenter, and established a workshop in the small village of Billund. He made ladders, stools and ironing boards. And soon had a thriving business. But he was struck by a double tragedy. The Great Depression and the death of his wife.

Forced to retrench most of his staff he struggled to make ends meet. It was then that he decided to use his wood supply to make something else. And so he dedicated his time solely to making wooden toys. He renamed his company after the Danish words 'leg godt' which means 'play well'. After a slow start his toys soon became popular.

But in 1942 his factory burnt down. And Ole lost everything. But he wasn't deterred. He rebuilt it. And continued to make his wooden toys. Then in 1949 Ole bought a plastic moulding machine. And began to produce plastic toys as well. Soon he had a range of more than 200 toys. About half of which were plastic. The Danish magazine *Toy-Times*, visited the factory in Billund in the early 1950s, but felt that plastic would never be able to replace traditional wooden toys.

Clearly they were wrong because Ole's company was...LEGO. Here are some facts about LEGO:

- LEGO is sold in 130 countries and the company employs nineteen thousand employees globally.
- LEGO is the world's largest tyre manufacturer. Producing around 318 million tires a year.

- LEGO has produced roughly 650 billion pieces. Or enough for every person on the planet to have about one hundred bricks.
- According to consultancy firm *Brand Finance*, LEGO is the world's most valuable toy brand, valued at just over seven-and-a-half billion US dollars.
- The largest LEGO structure ever built is a model of London's Tower Bridge. It took five months to build and used 5 805 846 bricks.

LEGO had small beginnings in Ole Kirk Christiansen's workshop. But it grew and grew so that today the company is a worldwide phenomenon. Put your hand up if you've ever owned or bought a LEGO set.

Well this morning we turn our attention to another example of phenomenal growth. As we study two parables that Jesus tells about the kingdom of God. They're both short parables. Let's read them again: **Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches."**

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

So Jesus compares the kingdom of God to how a mustard seed grows and to how yeast is used in the baking process. Let's have a look at each of those in turn.

So first. The mustard seed. Now if you read any commentaries on this parable you'll think that you're reading a botany journal. Because there are endless debates about what Jesus means. Is he talking about the 7-metre tall *Salvadora persica*. Otherwise known as the Mustard Tree. Or the 3-metre tall *Brassica nigra*. The Black Mustard. Which is actually a plant. If it's a plant, then how could birds nest in it?

But to analyse the parable like this is to miss the point. Jesus was speaking to an audience who would have been familiar with the mustard seed. It was the smallest seed someone living in the Middle-East at that time could cultivate in their garden.

And Jesus says that from this small seed grows a large tree. Whichever tree it was doesn't really matter. In fact, if the mustard seed did normally only grow into a bush. Then the impact of this parable is even greater. Because the seed has surpassed expectations. It's now so big that even birds can perch in its branches.

And so the point of the parable isn't a difficult one to understand. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. Just like the mustard seed starts out small...and then grows into a large tree. So too God's kingdom starts out small but finishes big.

But there's probably a little bit more going on in this parable. Which we see when Jesus talks about the birds. The language Jesus uses here would remind his listeners of another tree mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel. So let me read that passage for us again that we read earlier:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.’”

Now this passage comes at the end of a parable that God tells Ezekiel to speak to Israel. We won't get into the details of that parable. That would be a sermon on its own. But the point of Ezekiel 17 is to rebuke king Zedekiah. To tell him that God's people will be taken into exile because of his treachery. It's a bleak outlook for Israel at that time.

But then there's this message of future hope. The passage that I just read. Where God promises that he himself will take a shoot. A descendant of David. And plant it and cause it to flourish into a large tree. Birds of every kind will find shelter in its branches. It's a promise of God's blessing to the nations. A future messianic hope. That a descendant of David would once more establish God's kingdom.

And so you can see why Jesus would use the same language of a tree and birds here. He's the tender sprig that Ezekiel spoke about. A descendant in the line of David who's going to

establish God's kingdom forever. We'll think about that a bit more later on. But for now let's move on to our next parable.

So second. The parable of the yeast. Well I did some research this week on yeast. So did you know that yeast is actually a type of fungus? There are many different kinds of yeast. But the two most common are those used to make bread. And to brew beer.

To make bread you take dough. A mixture of flour and water. And combine it with yeast. The yeast feeds on the sugar contained in the dough. Producing carbon dioxide and alcohol in the process. That carbon dioxide is released into the air bubbles in the dough. Which inflates it. A bit like someone blowing up bubble-gum. As more and more air bubbles fill with carbon dioxide, the dough rises. And you're left with leavened bread.

Now the amazing thing about yeast is how it permeates the dough. This woman is making a huge amount of bread. The NIV calls it a large amount of flour. That's a bit of an understatement. In the original language we're told it's three measures. That's about 25 kilograms. Probably enough to feed about a hundred people! And the yeast will work its way through all that flour.

And Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like the process of making bread. You start out with a small amount of yeast. But by the end its worked its way through the entire batch. Once again the parable isn't a difficult one to understand. God's kingdom starts out small but finishes big.

Listen to what one wannabe chef wrote: I had never made anything with sourdough starter before. But when I came across a recipe for sourdough cinnamon buns, I was more than willing to give it a shot. What could go wrong?

Deciding to double the yield, I got to work on the starter. The recipe never mentioned what type of container to put it in, so I chose a glass bowl. Filling about a quarter of the bowl, I covered the top with a plate and placed it on the kitchen table while I did the dishes and waited for the dough to rise.

When I'd placed the last cup in the cupboard, a half-hour had passed and the starter was on the move. They weren't kidding when they called this a quick-rising yeast. Like lava from a

volcano, goo streamed down the sides of the bowl. It moved across the table and onto the chairs, ultimately ending up on the floor.

I grabbed a towel and tried to contain the dough. I called out to my mother in the next room for help. She took one look, howled in laughter and left to get her camera.

Eventually we managed to trap the doughy monster in a large glass jar. Salvaging only about a quarter of the mixture, I screwed the lid on tight, set it on the kitchen counter and began a second cleanup.

What seemed like only an hour passed. I finished scrubbing and turned to check the jar. To my astonishment, the starter was oozing out from beneath the lid, running down the sides of the jar and again onto the floor. I grabbed the jar and unscrewed the lid. The pressure from inside shot the lid out of my hand. It hit the kitchen window frame, narrowly missing the glass, while the starter landed on the ceiling fan, which whipped most of it around the room.

The dog and I stood dripping with yeasty slime. Sourdough starter was on the ceiling, on the walls, on the table, counters and chairs—it was even in the cupboards.

Once again everything came to a halt. Once again I called to my mother for help. And again she came from the next room, burst into laughter and turned around to get her camera.

This cleanup took hours, but I used what was left of the starter to finish the cinnamon buns. When I looked at the recipe again, it turned out I only needed a single cup of starter for a double batch of buns.

I learned many lessons that day. First, do not double a recipe for sourdough starter. Second, if you put the starter in a jar, don't tighten the lid unless you want to create a dough bomb. Finally, hide every camera from your mother when trying out a new recipe.

And so Jesus tells these two parables to illustrate the same point. God's kingdom starts out small, but finishes big. And so for the rest of our time today I want us to think about these two aspects of the kingdom of God.

So first. God's kingdom starts out small. Actually God's kingdom starts with just one person. The shoot. The tender sprig mentioned in Ezekiel. Which is Jesus. But how can we be sure that Jesus is the messiah promised from Ezekiel? Well if you read the first few chapters of Luke's Gospel you'll see how he piles on the evidence. Eyewitness after eyewitness.

An angel appears to Mary and says: **You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.**

Then when Elizabeth visits Mary, she's filled with the Holy Spirit and tells Mary how blessed she is that the mother of her Lord should come to her.

At the birth of Jesus an angel of the Lord appears to shepherds in the field. And tells them: **Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.** And then the heavenly host break out into song. Praising God.

When Jesus is presented at the temple there's a man there called Simeon. A righteous and devout man who's waiting for the consolation of Israel. That is, he's waiting for God to come and rescue and comfort his people. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he saw the Christ. And so when Jesus appears he blesses God saying: **Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.**

There's also a prophetess called Anna, who never leaves the temple. But spends all her day in fasting and prayer. And she tells everyone who's waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem about this child.

And then some years later John the Baptist tells people to repent and believe because the kingdom of God is at hand.

When Jesus begins his ministry Luke records for us an incident at a synagogue. Jesus is handed a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls the scroll and reads: **The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the**

oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus is the one who will deliver his people.

And then when some Jews try to prevent Jesus from leaving them he says: **I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.**

Luke wants to make absolutely sure that we see Jesus for who he is. The long-awaited messiah who establishes God's kingdom. With the arrival of God's king. God's kingdom has come. And the kingdom starts small. With just the king.

But that king soon collects followers. Jesus has many disciples who follow him. And he has a select twelve who he names apostles. But that's still a pretty small group. And what's interesting is who Jesus chooses to get the ball rolling on his kingdom plan.

He doesn't select generals or emperors or people with influence and power. No he chooses twelve pretty ordinary individuals.

One of them is a terrorist. Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were a terrorist group bent on freeing Judea from the Romans.

One of them is a hated tax-collector. Levi. Otherwise known as Matthew.

One of them is a doubter. Thomas.

Two of them completely misunderstand his mission. And so James and John want positions of authority in God's kingdom. And get their mom to ask on their behalf.

A number of them were simple fishermen. In fact, Peter and John are referred to in the book of Acts as uneducated, common men.

Peter will deny Jesus three times during his trial.

And Judas Iscariot will betray him.

These aren't exactly the men you'd choose when trying to get a new enterprise off the ground. Weak, unreliable, not respectable and slow to understand. But thankfully God's kingdom growth plan isn't up to these individuals.

At his trial and crucifixion, all of Jesus' disciples will abandon him. He'll die naked and alone on a Roman cross. Without friends. And it would seem that God's kingdom is snuffed out before it even began. But then this same Jesus will rise from the dead three days later. He'll show that he really was the promised messiah.

And when the resurrected Jesus meets again with those eleven broken men. And then ascends into heaven. Sending his Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Well they become changed individuals. From weak and timid. Cowering behind locked doors in Jerusalem. To boldly proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues and porticos and streets of Jerusalem.

And I don't know about you but that's a real encouragement to me. The fact that God uses these men. Because it means that he can use me too! And he can use you! It doesn't matter that we often mess up. That sometimes our efforts at evangelism are downright awful. It doesn't matter that we aren't famous. Or that our days seem to be taken up with the monotony of work or school runs. Because God can use you to grow his kingdom. He's done it before. And he's doing it throughout our world. With men and women just like you and me. With no special skills and training. But who love Jesus. And want to see his kingdom grow.

Now when Jesus originally spoke these words he was only just establishing his kingdom. If you were one of those who was listening to him that day. You might not have believed what he was saying. Or you couldn't imagine how this kingdom could possibly come about. There was already a kingdom. Called the Roman Empire. And they didn't like competition. And so for Jesus' original audience the message is this. Don't worry if the kingdom looks like it's small and insignificant. Because like the mustard seed and the yeast it will grow into something much larger.

Well almost two thousand years later we see the truth of what Jesus had to say. We have the advantage of hindsight. And so second. God's kingdom finishes big. Earlier we saw how one carpenter grew his small workshop into a toy kingdom. Well Jesus was another carpenter whose kingdom started out small but will end big.

And so as Luke continues his story in the book of Acts, we see how God's kingdom grew. At Pentecost about three thousand people are baptised. Soon that number is five thousand men. Disciples continue to multiply greatly, so that even a large number of priests become followers of Jesus.

Even when persecution breaks out it simply means that the gospel goes to the nations. Samaria, Ethiopia, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Paul and Barnabas take the gospel to Cyprus and then on to Asia Minor. And then into Europe. The kingdom of God spreads so far and wide and so quickly that in Acts 17 the disciples are accused of turning the world upside down.

Brothers and sisters, God is working out his plan for the nations. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it. Sometimes we think that growth is slow. And we're just plodding along. We might be discouraged by large parts of Europe that seem to be falling into secularism. But the latest poll done in 2011 showed that there are 2.2 billion Christians worldwide. That number is expected to be 3 billion by 2050.

Consider for example the nation of China. A communist state that actively clamps down on Christianity. And where the church has had to survive underground. Or be part of the big brother state church. By 1953 all the foreign missionaries had been expelled from China. And many thought that the church would die out.

Today there are an estimated 100 to 200 million Christians in China. That's more than there are members of the Communist Party. Within the next 15 years it's projected that China will have more Christians than any other nation on earth. God is building his kingdom. Or as we sung earlier...God is on the move...hallelujah!

But God's kingdom doesn't just finish here on earth. It has a glorious end. Because one day Jesus is coming back to rule forever over the new heavens and the new earth. Over that glorious kingdom there'll be no end. The book of Revelation describes it this way: **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 in front of 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.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

“Amen!

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength

be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen!”

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?”

I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

they are before the throne of God

and serve him day and night in his temple;

and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

Never again will they hunger;

never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them,

nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd;

he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

What a marvellous picture of God’s kingdom, and the glorious end that awaits all Christians.

Let’s pray: Father as we look back we see how your kingdom has grown from small beginnings to reach every corner of the earth. And as we look forward we long for that day when Jesus comes again to rule his kingdom forever. Help us to grow your kingdom we pray. In Jesus’ name. Amen.