

Parables of the Heart "Having a Restful Heart"

Passages: Hebrews 4:9-11
Matthew 13:31-32

So far, we've studied the first two parables in Matthew 13—the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds. From these first two parables, it is easy to imagine that the disciples would have been discouraged by what they heard...

- a. In "*The Parable of the Sower*", only one soil of four would be truly receptive to the Word sown.
- b. In "*The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds*", they learned that Satan would be doing his best to undermine the efforts of the Sower.

As early as John Chrysostom (a famous 4th century preacher), commentators have suggested that the next few parables in Matthew 13 were told by Jesus to *encourage* His disciples in reference to the kingdom. The first of these "*encouraging parables*" is the one we will look at today: "***The Parable of the Mustard Seed.***"

Let's pray.

We all need a vision of something bigger than ourselves to which we can be part of and proud of; **a place, a group, a community** to which we feel connected and in which we feel worthwhile. **You could call it a Kingdom.** A kingdom can be defined as "*anything conceived as constituting a realm or sphere of independent action or control.*" In sociological terms, these various *kingdoms* (running out in concentric circles, like ripples on a pond) contribute significantly to our sense of *identity, community and rest.*

At the most basic level, your **family** is a sort of 'Kingdom'. Although you didn't choose it, it chose you, and (for most people) it gives you your identity, and makes you feel connected and worthwhile. Of all places, the family is a place where you can *rest*—where you don't have to prove yourself.

On the next level, we have our local **clubs**, including community organisations and sporting teams, all of which serve to make us feel connected, valued and

alive. In the few times I go down to the RSL, I see many men (in particular) who, surrounded by their mates, find a strong sense of identity and *rest* there.

Expanding out further, many people find living in particular **suburb** fulfils their need for identity, community and rest. In a little booklet entitled, "**A mortgage, a motor-mower and a mission**", Simon Holt explains how "*suburbia's development has long been inspired by an almost utopian vision of life: a community of like minded citizens...residing together in tranquillity and peace...*". Front yards without fences, combined with a 1.8 metre fence around the back, means that there is a happy balance between the public and private spheres of life. It's here, in suburbia, where millions of traditional Australians have gone to find identity, community and rest.

Most of us, however, need a bit more than this. That's why, once a year, we become avid supporters of our **state** in State of Origin rugby. There's a clear sense of *identity and community* that comes through this event. And when we win, well, there's a sense of *resting*...until the next match!

Going one step further, many of us find that being **Australian** gives us a sense of *identity, community and rest*. Just take a trip overseas and you'll soon discover how important one's **nationality** is as you spot Australian flags on another person's backpack or Tee-shirt! We were in North Carolina for Anzac Day this year and all the Aussies (and one New Zealander) went out to dinner together. We sensed a common *identity, community and rest*.

We could even go out to a larger circle called **ethnicity or culture**. When Australian diggers went off to war around the world, not only did they fight for Australia, but they fought for the greater glory of the British Empire! Increasing numbers of people living in Australia today come from overseas...and their ethnicity is very important to them as far as *identity, community and rest* are concerned.

As I said, all of these so-called 'kingdoms' encourage us with a grand vision based in 3 promises:

- Come in and find your identity
- Come in and find your community
- Come in and find a place of rest

In a sense, each is a vision of Utopia—of a place beyond ourselves where we live in perfect harmony and peace with others!

Now, believe it or not, **the Parable of the Mustard Seed** does the same thing. That is, Jesus offers us a *vision of utopia* based in the same three promises:

- Come in and find your identity
- Come in and find your community
- Come in and find a place of rest

His vision, however, is quite different to all the rest...in four ways:

1. **It's an Ancient vision.** All our human kingdoms come and go with time. Where is the Roman Empire today? Where is Alexander the Great? Or Julius Caesar? But the idea of a tree that becomes the universal home for all the birds of the air is an idea that stretches back in time—back to the days of Abraham, when He made the following three-fold promise to Abraham: ***“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*** Ever since Genesis 12, God's been talking about a universal kingdom in which all the people of the universe will be blessed! As I said, it's an ancient vision and it started with the Kingdom of Israel!

And even when Israel started to falter and fail, it wasn't the end of it. Indeed, the prophet Ezekiel kept this vision burning when God said to him:

“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.” (Ezekiel 17:22-23)

As you can see, the parable given by Jesus was not really anything new—it was simply a continuation of this ancient Kingdom vision!

2. **It's a universal vision.** All our efforts to create our own kingdom are, by nature, restrictive. There are rules and criteria which tell you whether you're in or out. But not the Kingdom of Heaven! By using the phrase, "***the birds of the air***", Jesus is including every type and variety of bird on earth. In other words, this single mustard tree will become the new home for any and every "bird" who chooses to come to it; not for just a localised few.

3. **It is an unbelievable vision.** All our earthly kingdoms are tangible and believable. They are concrete and practical. But not the Kingdom of heaven! It stretches belief.
 - a. Jesus starts with a mustard seed; something so small that it's easily overlooked.
 - b. Jesus next speaks about how it grows into a tree. In fact, Jesus says it becomes "the largest tree in the garden". Of course, that's a ridiculous image; it's hard to imagine or believe since Mustard seeds don't really become trees—they only become bushes or plants! In the end, this image is as unbelievable as the one found in Daniel 2, where a small stone becomes a huge mountain!
 - c. And then Jesus tells us that "***the birds of the air***" come and nest in its branches. How many birds can nest in a mustard tree, really? It's unbelievable to human thinking, but that's exactly the testimony of the Book of Acts! Unbelievable!
 - i. On the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2**), the first day of the church's existence, the number of 'birds' who found shelter in His branches grew to over 3000...in just one day.
 - ii. By **Acts 4**, that number grew to about 5000.
 - iii. By **Acts 9**, we read that the number of the disciples had "multiplied" throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria; and they were just beginning to spread out to the uttermost parts of the earth! Unbelievable!

4. It is an Uncontrollable vision!

Notice that all our earthly kingdoms are ones that we control. We build our little self-contained kingdoms of family, club, suburb, state, nation or culture ... in an attempt to find our identity, our community and a place of rest. All our visions are neat and tidy, practical and measurable...but, in the end, they are all man-made! And that's why we like them—because **we're in control!**

How different is the vision given to us in this parable! There is nothing to control! A tiny mustard seed grows (independent of any human intervention) into the greatest of all trees and, spontaneously, all the birds of the air find shelter in it. It goes against everything that is measurable, practical and man-made. But that's the point! For the fact is that it is all of God's doing.

In fact, **not even Jesus had control over it!** He had to trust the Father and yield His life into His hands. Indeed, you could interpret the parable in this way:

- That it was Jesus who was the mustard seed, planted in the ground in His death and burial. (“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.”)
- Then, in His resurrection, *His Body became the Mustard Tree*, a shelter for all the birds of the air.

Isn't that why, only two chapters earlier, Jesus said to His disciples, **“Come unto me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest”**???. He is the Mustard Tree in whom we find...

- ...our **identity**; in His branches, we discover who we are and who we were always meant to be...as we find ourselves in the midst of a diverse and precious gathering, where no two birds sing exactly the same song!
- ...we find our **community**; in a place where 'birds' from every nation, race, tribe and tongue are drawn to the central figure of Christ crucified. His broken body unites us all as one; His shed blood cleanses us from every sin. Everyone is welcome in this community- No one will be turned away.
- ...we find our place of **rest**. For here, in the Mustard Tree, there's nothing to prove. There are no achievements that we can boast about...

except, of course, of what Jesus has done for us. We come and rest. We come and find forgiveness and a new beginning. We come and build our nest here. **We set up your home here**, in the outstretched branches of Jesus, the mustard tree.

As I was saying earlier, there are a lot of Kingdoms that human beings build in this world, all constructed in an elusive attempt to find utopia; kingdoms of family, club, suburb, state, nation, culture...inward-looking enclaves where we hope to find our *identity*, our *community* and a place of *rest*. **But, sadly, they all fail.** Why? Because, since the beginning of time, *our true identity, community and rest* were only ever meant to be found in Jesus and His Kingdom!

I love the way Baxter Kruger puts it in his little booklet entitled “**Home**” (p 31).

“Is this not the story of our lives—one confused attempt after another to (construct a Kingdom) for ourselves; to create it, manufacture it, conjure it up by our own resources? We try to find (our identity, community and rest) in marriage, in friendships, in our children, in our pets, in our careers or work, in our glamour and glory, in our sensuality and sex, in our noble causes and clubs, in our athletics, in our material possessions, in our politics or power, in church, in the Bible, in our religious doings, in our chants and crystals... But (these things exist) in only one place—in Jesus’ relationship with his Father in the Spirit.”

This is not to say that all these other so-called *Kingdoms* are wrong or ungodly. Jesus doesn’t want to take away our family, our clubs, our suburbs, our states or our ethnic differences. (He doesn’t want to put an end to State of Origin football!) Rather, He wants to place all these things *within their proper perspective!*—**by showing us that the *identity, community and rest* that they offer is only a dim reflection of what the Kingdom of Heaven gives.**

That’s why our man-made kingdoms (our homes, or families, or clubs, or ethnic groups) must never become an end in themselves! If we’re not careful, they will distract us from the greater reality of Jesus and His *Mustard Tree*.

Indeed, there may be times when we need to have all our earthly kingdoms stripped away from us, just so we gain a new vision for the Kingdom of Heaven! After all, it’s often when we have no other place to go...no other

kingdom in which we can find our identity, our community and our rest... that we turn to **the Mustard Tree** as a last resort, and find shelter in its branches.

This, for example, is the story of St. Georges' Anglican Church, in Baghdad, Iraq. In a book entitled, Faith Under Fire, its British priest, Canon Andrew White, describes what it means to have nothing left but Jesus. (pp 62-63)

*“Despite the fact that St. George’s is constantly under fire, it is the happiest church I have ever served in. We may be upset by huge problems, but we also have huge joy because the Lord does meet our needs, and our faith gives us hope in tragedy. It may sound very strange to say (this)..., but it is true. Everyone who could afford to flee Iraq has now gone...Those who are still left in Iraq are those who have nowhere to go. They are the ones who couldn’t get out, because they are seriously poor. Yet, at the same time, it is true to say that those in our church who remain are here because they do not want to leave. ..We must stay because we know that God is involved in Iraq and we are part of His story. We know, without doubt, that the words we say at the start of each service are absolutely true: **“Allah hu ma’na wa Ruh al-Qudus ma’na aithan.”** (“God is here, and His Holy Spirit is here.”)... Thus, in the midst of tragedy, when we have lost everything and Jesus is all we have left, we know that He is all we need.”*

Here is a flock of birds that has found refuge in the Mustard Tree!

Let me bring this sermon to a conclusion:

In the first two parables of Matthew 13 (“The parable of the 4 soils” and “The parable of the wheat and the weeds”), Jesus reminded His disciples that not all people will accept the Word of God. Satan is at work trying to destroy what God is doing.

Today, however, through the parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus promotes a positive vision. He encourages His disciples to believe that, despite the resistance and the many setbacks...despite the abuses and the false accusations... **nothing will be able to stop the Kingdom of Heaven from expanding.** In God’s sovereignty, this mustard seed will grow until it blesses the entire world; until the birds of the air find shelter in its branches!

So ...

- Come to the Mustard Tree (not only today, but tomorrow and every day into the future) and find your true *identity*.
- Come to the Mustard Tree and find the one, true, universal *community*
- Come to the Mustard Tree and find the only place of perfect *rest*...in the arms of Jesus.

Let's pray.