

From the smallest seed...

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Proper 6: Mark 4:26-34

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The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Let's stop there, before we get to the part about *the seed growing into a great shrub.* We need to stop with the smallest of seeds or we may miss the Truth of God's entry into the world and into our lives.

Jesus is Lord of all; the eternally begotten Word without whom nothing was made that was made (John 1:3). In him all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19). Yet Christ is the manifestation of divinity by means of humility. Jesus comes as we are, so that we might become what He is (1 John 3:2). The height of God's mercy for us is revealed in His lowliness; the richness of His life is revealed in His poverty, His life poured out for us.

I think we have a difficult time with Jesus' lowliness, His 'insignificance'. We want Christ the heavenly Messiah, high and uplifted on some throne, arranging our lives; the cosmic, all powerful Christ, who (we hope) will grant our desires. We want Him to impose his will, sweep away our doubts, give us unshakeable faith, sweep us off our feet. We may become a bit peeved, put-off, even angry with God when Jesus will not meet our expectations for our lives.

It seems to be the case that Jesus will not conquer us, although He will cherish us. Jesus will not overpower us; He has and will plant a seed of divine life in us. We may receive and protect such seed deep within us. In a very real, and practical sense, the Divine Life does not grow from the outside in; Jesus plants His own Life at the core of our being, in the secret, lowly recesses, there to grow out and envelope us.

Evelyn Underhill (an English spiritual writer of the early 20th Century) referred to this as *...the simplest yet the deepest truth about (Jesus') relation to the soul.* She wrote, *...this is the chosen vehicle for the unmeasured inpouring of the Divine Life and Love...it is like a quite voice speaking in **our** deepest prayer (as the angel spoke to Mary): 'The Lord be with you...' and (the invitation calls) forth the one and only answer (as Mary answered), 'I am the Lord's servant, be it done to me according to your Word!' Humble self-abandonment is found and declared to be enough to give us God."* (**Lent**, p. 40).

It is a delicate thing. Out of love for us Christ comes gently, softly, lowly. Perhaps our desire for God's power gets in the way more than anything else. As the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel commented, *"Perhaps our faith is so weak, because we are not willing to look low enough."*

We can ignore and trample and throw away the lowliness of God's love for us. Or, we can, admittedly one's own powerlessness, receive the seed of divinity; we can look for it, and treasure both Sower and Seed, who is Jesus, and long for this growth of His Life in one's own Life. Indeed, this is the only way Christ grows in us, by our longing for, our desiring of, our cooperating with the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and, yes even physical, growth that God gives.

We may, often and easily, choke and stunt the growth of Christ in us. We do this through pride. It is as if the soil should suddenly act as if the seed and the fruit spring spontaneously from the soil itself. The sower, the seed, the tree are all irrelevant; they have nothing to do with it; indeed it is as if the soil should say, "I make my own abundance." This is, of course, impossible.

We may also subvert the growth of God in us by presuming we can direct the growth better than God. This, too, is absurd. It is as if a biological or genetic experiment has gone tragically wrong. The results of self-growth are pathetically grotesque and warped.

Thomas Merton wrote of the *need for compassion and tenderness towards the infinity fragility of the divine life within us*. He continues, *...this could and should lead me more and more to a new turning...a liberation from all futile concerns, to let (God) emerge in His mystery and compassion within me. Yielding to the inexplicable demand of God's presence in weakness...this mustard seed, His Kingdom within me; the struggle of the very small to survive and change my self-affirmations* (Turning Towards The World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol IV, p. 167).

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... Can you find and cherish that seed within you? Can you sink deeply enough, through all the layers of wishful thinking, pretension and egoism, to find and treasure the small, broken seed of Christ's life? Are you able, putting all else aside, to allow Christ to grow in you as He desires? Are you willing to practice a life in which you live out of the hidden center of Christ growing in you, rather than living from the outside distractions of a deformed world? Do you wish to become – through the disciplines of prayer, worship, study and continual works of spiritual and practical charity - the good soil in which the Life of Christ grows and bears fruit? Paul wrote of his own growth in Christ, *He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'* *So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me"* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God of the universe, God of our own small souls, we beg you to give us such faith and weakness to cherish the gift of your Life planted deep within us. As the vast earth receives the small seed, give us humility to receive the small seed of your infinite Life. And then help us, we pray, to nurture your Divine Life in our lives. Have mercy upon us, most merciful Jesus, so that we may bear much fruit, and so prove to be your disciples. Amen.