

**The parable of the mustard seed**  
**(Mark 4: 26-34)**  
**St. Paul's, Milford**  
**Sunday, 21 June 2015: 8:00 and 9:30**

In the show *Sound of Music* one of the songs includes the words:

*You start at the very beginning; a very good place to start. When you read you begin with ABC; when you sing you begin with Do re mi.*

Well today I'm not going to start at the beginning. I'll start at the end. The end of the gospel reading. Jesus only spoke to the people in parables. In other words he told them a story. Jesus never gave a lecture; never organised a conference. No, Jesus always used a parable; always told a story. I understand a parable to mean an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It uses ordinary everyday things to explain a deeper meaning.

Today there are in fact two parables, but they're closely related. The first one is about seeds generally. When you scatter the seed on the ground it just grows and grows, even while the farmer is sleeping. Without much human effort: first the stalk, then the head, then the grain and when it's ripe the farmer comes along with his sickle and harvests it.

However, it's the second one I want to concentrate on; what's called the parable of the mustard seed. Today we've given you a packet with some mustard seed. Please don't open it now, otherwise we'll have mustard seeds all over the place for weeks! Instead, take it home, sow the seeds and see what happens over the next few days.

In Jesus' day everyone knew about the mustard seed. It was thought to be the smallest of all seeds. But the mustard seed eventually grew into something like a tree. The birds liked mustard seed. Often what seemed like a cloud of birds could be seen over a mustard plant.

What the story is saying is this: Never be put off by small beginnings.

Remember that first day at school. Everyone seemed so much bigger. That first day at work; they're all senior to me. The first steps taken on a mountain climb. The first few miles on a family holiday to the other end of NZ. Those first few steps can be a bit scary. Today Emily takes her first few steps in the

Christian faith. She came last week to check us out and she was very, very good. And remember that she's not taking those steps alone. She has the support and love of her mum and dad (and that's easy to see) and a whole lot of other family members and friends.

That's true of her life as a member of the church and as a child of God. But it's true too of her life in general. Let me explain further. Never be put off by small beginnings. It may seem that we can produce only a very small effect. But if that small effect is repeated and repeated the small effect will become very great. We've all seen what happens when you get a large jug of water and then we put a few drops of something into it. In no time at all those few drops change the colour of the whole liquid. Just a couple of drops make all the difference. The moral of the story, of course, is that somebody must start everything; everything must have a beginning and it's usually a small beginning. Nothing starts off full size. But by adding together all those small efforts we end up with an amazing result.

What's true of one person is true also of the church. If we think of the tree that can grow from a small seed then just imagine that it stands for the church all over the world of which we are a part.

Once upon a time, a new church was being built somewhere. One of the things they wanted to put into the church was a great stained glass window. The committee had many discussions about what design should be chosen. Eventually they decided to use these words from a hymn:

*Around the throne of God in heaven  
Thousands of God's children stand.*

Anyway, they employed a well-known artist to paint the picture from which the window would be made. The artist began to work on it and the more he did the more he enjoyed doing it. Finally, he finished the picture. He went to bed and fell asleep. But in the night he woke up. He could hear a noise in his studio. He got up, went downstairs and there he found a stranger with a brush and all the different paints. He was working on the picture! The artist was irate. "Stop at once," he demanded! "How dare you! You'll ruin my picture!" "I think," said the stranger, "you've ruined it already!" "What do you mean?" said the artist. "What are you talking about?"

“Well,” said the stranger. “You have many colours on your palette, but you’ve only used one for the faces of the children. Who told you that in heaven there are only children whose faces are white?”

“No one,” replied the artist. “I just thought of it that way.”

“Look,” the stranger replied, “why don’t we make some of their faces yellow and brown and black and red, for some of the children I know are like that.”

“Okay then,” said the artist, “but who are you?”

The stranger smiled and he said, “a long time ago I said, 'let the children come to me and don’t stop them, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven'. And I’m still saying it.” And then the artist realised it was the Lord himself. He looked at the picture and there he could see children with many different faces of different colours.

In the morning the artist woke up. He put on his dressing gown and rushed into his studio. His picture was still there, but it was just as he’d left it. He realised that he’d really had a dream; he’d had a vision. And although the committee members were due in a couple of hours to view the painting he grabbed his brushes and his paints and began to colour in the children’s faces in the way Jesus had told him. When the committee arrived they thought the picture was very beautiful. One of them whispered: It’s God’s family at home!

The church is the family of God and that Church which began in Palestine, as small as the tiny mustard seed, has room in it for every nation in the world. There are no barriers in the church. Man made the barriers and God in Christ tore them down.

## **BAPTISM TALK**

Baptism is what we call a sacrament. And every sacrament has an outward sign and an inward meaning. Baptism is full of such signs.

### **The name**

Our surname is our family name and it's interesting to know where our name comes from. People haven't always had them. For a start all they did was help distinguish people, to tell the difference between one John and another John. And so they took the person's occupation (like Baker or Wright or Smith or Tailor or Shepherd or Farmer) or where they came from. Or perhaps Johnson which meant 'son of John', Thomson (son of Thom), or Davidson (son of David), or Mc (Scotland) or O' as in Ireland.

The other name is the Christian name; the name that belongs to me. The surname is the family name; the Christian name the individual name. People often used to be given the name of a saint or a hero. That still happens in some places like PNG where I worked with a man called Ezekiel. We also had a Moses and the caretaker was Augustine.

Now in baptism we receive our Christian name and so this event, this day, is special to us and our family, but it's also special to the church for today marks the day on which we become a member of the church.

### **The water**

Water is indispensable. We can't live without it. People die because of lack of water. Water brings life. If you think of a desert, or the Outback of Australia, water is scarce. You have a drought: nothing grows, animals die. In Central Otago, where I was born, there's very little rain and it's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. And so they have irrigation to bring water in and share it among the farmers. And because the soil is so rich, add water and you can grow the most wonderful crops, many kinds of fruit and tons of wine.

### **The font**

It comes from the word for Fountain. Traditionally placed near the entrance to the church. A number of churches have shifted their font for convenience but I'm pleased that at St Paul's the font has remained here. It represents the entry into the Christian church, which is what baptism is.

## **The shell**

There are many kinds of shells: paua, conch, cowry, nautilus, etc. But traditionally at baptism we use the scallop shell. It's found in many places, including NZ. But in particular it was found on the coast of Spain. There's a story (and it's only a story) that the apostle St. James died and his body was taken to Spain to the place called Santiago. Off the coast of Spain the ship was wrecked and the body was lost. Some time later it washed ashore. It was okay, but it was covered with scallops. Now for hundreds of years, people, we call them pilgrims, have walked to this place. They still do and in fact there are more visitors now than ever before. Last year 250,000 people walked along the way. They come from all over Europe and in fact many NZers have gone there, including some friends of ours. It's quite a long walk, perhaps 780 kms or 500 miles. The scallop shell is used as an emblem or symbol. The grooves on the shell represent the various routes the pilgrims travel and they all meet at the same place, the tomb of St. James at Santiago de Compostela. And just as the waves of the ocean wash the shells on to the seashore God's hand also guides the pilgrims to Santiago.

And all along the way the shell is to be seen. It's seen on posts and signs along the camino (the walk or the Way) to help guide the pilgrims in the right direction. And it's even seen on the pilgrims themselves. Wearing a shell tells people that you are a pilgrim. Most pilgrims receive a shell at the start of the journey and they sew it into their clothes or wear it around their neck. The shell is also the right size for gathering water to drink or for eating food.

The shell then reminds us of the Way. And we are taught that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

## **The candle**

Also shows us the way. Jesus is the Light of the World. Light over darkness; goodness over evil. We will present Emily with a candle and I hope that it may be lit each year on her day, perhaps too on her birthday. We present it to her, but she's too small to mess with matches, so others will look after it!

## **The oil using in anointing**

This oil was blessed by the Bishop on Maundy Thursday. It's a symbol of healing. Jesus was anointed with oil. A baby is anointed with oil; a person in

need of healing or approaching death is also anointed. It's God's way of saying, I love you and I'll always be with you.

### **The cross**

The universal symbol of the Christian faith. In baptism the baby is signed with the cross. Like a badge, an invisible badge, it can't be seen, but it's there. God is saying: You are my child and I will always love you. There's a prayer, a Celtic prayer used in Ireland and other places:

May the road rise up to meet you.  
May the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face;  
the rains fall soft upon your fields  
and until we meet again,  
may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

It's based on the cross on which Jesus died. Very simple. But think of it as the letter I. But the letter I has been crossed out. Turned into a cross. Jesus teaches us that we must cross ourselves out too. There's a familiar saying that captures this: it's not all about you, you know! Have you heard that? Putting others first and yourself second. Making sure others are served first; letting others go through the doorway first. My wife taught me a saying once. It came from her childhood. If you are pouring out drinks for two people, you and another person, one person pours, but the other person chooses. Just in case you give yourself the one with the biggest drink. Remember then: the cross is the letter I crossed out.