

The Mystery Of God's Kingdom

The Kingdom of God. It is present and yet it is hidden. It has arrived and yet it is to come. It meets opposition and yet it will not be overcome. To get across these mysteries Jesus used parables.

What is a parable?

'Parable' comes from a Greek word meaning 'to put side by side' or 'to compare'. A parable is a simple story usually with a single, simple meaning.

Why did Jesus use parables?

1. Parables are simple stories, easy to listen to, remember and pass on. Details were often taken from everyday life in Palestine – seeds, wheat, weeds, rocks, rags, wineskins, oil lamps, and so on.
2. The Jews were used to listening to parables as this method of teaching was well established in their culture.
3. Parables help get across a mysterious reality: the Kingdom of God. The parables tell us that the Mystery of the Kingdom of God is unfolding before everyone's eyes.
4. The hearers are left to interpret the parables for themselves. The hearers might go away and wonder: 'where do I fit in this story?' or 'what's it saying about my life?'

The parable of the Sower 4:1-9

***But some seeds fell in good soil, and the plants sprouted, grew, and produced corn: some had thirty grains, others sixty, and others a hundred.'* (4:8)**

The ancient method of sowing seed was called 'broadcasting'. A handful of seed would be scattered. Most of it would land in good soil, but some wouldn't.

So the *basic* message of this parable seems to be that the Kingdom of God will flourish in spite of setbacks. However, Jesus gave a more detailed explanation later.



Jesus explains the parable of the Sower 4:13-20

***Then Jesus asked them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How, then, will you ever understand any parable? The sower sows God's message ...'* (4:13-14)**

Some think the explanation was not from Jesus, but from later Christians. However, the Gospel tells us that Jesus would explain everything to his disciples when alone with them (cf. Mk 4:34). This is one such occasion.

Jesus highlights the various 'blocks' to the Kingdom of God: the work of Satan; fear of persecution; earthly cares and desires. God's message needs to be received with an open, trusting heart if it is to bear fruit.

The purpose of Parables 4:10.12

'You have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God ...But the others, who are on the outside, hear all things by means of parables, so that, they may look and look, yet not see; they may listen and listen, yet not understand. For if they did, they would turn to God, and he would forgive them.' (4:11-12)

This is a strange passage. On the surface, it seems that parables are meant to keep 'outsiders' in the dark about God's Kingdom. The underlined bit is a quote from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecy often fell on stony ground. Jesus seems to be pointing to the same problem: people being closed to God's message from the start.

This was an important passage for Mark's audience in Rome. 'Why did so many reject Jesus in his own day?' they might have asked. Answer: a stubborn refusal to see.

The parable of the Lamp 4:21-25

'Does anyone ever bring in a lamp and put it under a bowl or under a bed?' (4:21)

A lamp's purpose is to give light; it is foolish to prevent a lamp from serving its purpose. There was comfort for the early Christians; the light of the gospel will eventually shine out.

Perhaps Jesus is also criticising the religious authorities who may be trying to hide the light of God's Kingdom.



The parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-9

'Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing ...' (4:27)

This parable is unique to St Mark's Gospel. Its basic message seems to be that God's Kingdom grows by God's power alone.

For Mark's audience, this was a crucial message. Under fierce persecution, they must have wondered how they could 'keep alive' the Gospel message. Answer: their role is simply to plant the seeds of the Gospel. God's power alone will make it bear fruit.



The parable of the Mustard Seed 4:30.34

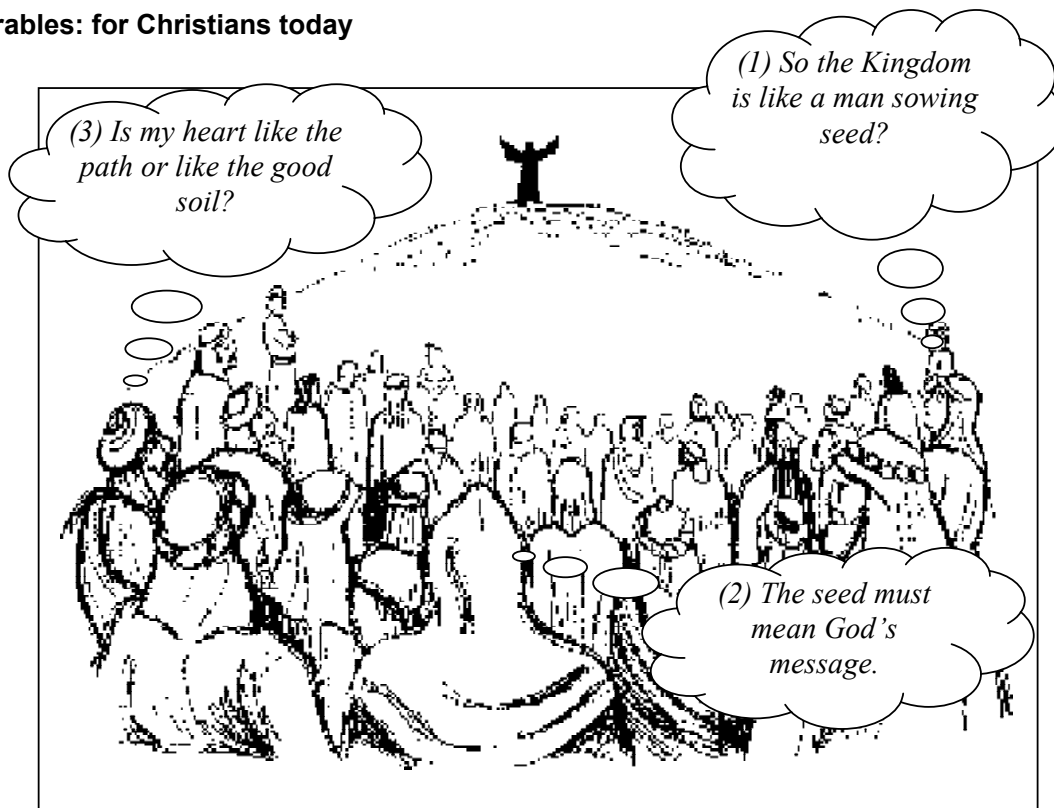
'After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.' (4:32)

Jesus uses this parable to get across the small beginnings and subsequent spectacular growth of the Kingdom of God. The mustard seed was the 'smallest seed' in proverbs – not in reality.

The parable echoes an older Jewish passage in which a great tree represented a kingdom and birds were all the different nations belonging to that kingdom. So perhaps the birds represent the gentiles who will enter the Kingdom of God.



Parables: for Christians today



Christians believe that the message of the parables is meant for all times and peoples. Take the *Parable of the Sower*. Jesus said the Kingdom of God was like a man sowing seed.

For a parable to do its work there needs to be three stages: **listen, understand, reflect**.

- 1 **Listen** – take the parable in.
- 2 **Understand** – work out its message.
- 3 **Reflect** – think how that message applies to you.

Christians today must do this in the same way as Jesus' first listeners.

Activities

- 1 Choosing the correct endings, answer the following in a sentence each.

What is the basic message of the Parable of the Sower?

- A the Kingdom of God will fail
- B the Kingdom will grow in spite of setbacks
- C the Kingdom of God is imperfect

According to Mark, the disciples

- A always understood the parables first time.
- B asked Jesus to explain their meaning.
- C didn't need to listen to what they knew already.

Which parable is found only in St Mark's Gospel?

- A Parable of the Lamp
- B Parable of the Sower
- C Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself

Which parable gets across that gentiles will enter God's Kingdom?

- A Parable of the Lamp
- B Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself
- C Parable of the Mustard Seed

2 Some of the statements below are false. Rewrite them so that they are true.

- a) *Jesus was the first to use parables as a way of getting a message across.*
- b) *The Parables of Jesus are about the Kingdom of God.*
- c) *Mustard seeds are the smallest of all seeds.*
- d) *Parables have no meaning for modern-day Christians.*
- e) *The word parable comes from the Greek for putting side by side.*
- f) *Parables are found only in the New Testament.*

3 '2000 year old parables for Palestine have no meaning for Christians today'

For ...

- Jesus used images from Palestine of his day in order to grab his *local* audience
- some parables (like the Mustard Seed) echo older stories familiar to Jesus' listeners – but not to Christians today
- the whole parable method was deep in the culture of the Jews of Jesus' day – not in modern culture ...

Against ...

- you might as well argue that because the Gospels were first written in old Greek, they're not meant for Christians today
- Parables can be readily understood when a few background details are made clear
- Christians believe that God's Word is never 'locked in' to a particular time or place – it is universal in its application ...

Extension

One way to understand the Kingdom of God is by comparing it with something opposite – for example, Hitler's dream of a 1000 year Reich (Reign) for Nazi ideals.

Use the information in the table beside and your own knowledge to write a 300 word essay on 'The Kingdom of God contrasted with the Third Reich'.

Kingdom of God	Third Reich
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inclusive • territory of the human heart • spread by conversion • maintained by unselfish love • allegiance to Christ • ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exclusive • territory of lands, peoples • spread by violent conquest • maintained by terror and propaganda • allegiance to the Führer • ...