THE NEW SHOFAR

The church is not a place where perfect people gather to say perfect things, or have perfect thoughts, or have perfect feelings. The Church is a place where imperfect people gather to provide encouragement, support, and service to each other as we press on in our journey to return to our Heavenly Father. — Joseph B. Wirthlin

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LONGER VERSION

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?

Ever the "good man" bringing forth an abundance of good things out of the store of his Heart, Jesus is again (**cf. 13:24**) said to "propose" a parable to the crowds. In this narrative-in-parable form Jesus creates an atmosphere that illustrates how, as divine Word, he attracts by persuading rather than by compelling. The number and variety of the parables show God's Wisdom as leaving no approach to man's heart untried. The omnipotent Word manifests his power through mercy administered with patience. *He wants to be loved more than to be obeyed, or to be obeyed only as a way of being loved*.

Perhaps with a touch of whimsicality, we could look at Jesus' education of the crowds in the things of his Kingdom as a training of the human palate to ever finer fare. First, he spoke of the virtues of salt (5:13). Now, he proposes the zest of mustard. In a moment it will be "fish of every kind" (13:47). Eventually he will astound us by perfecting the banquet with the offer of the bread and wine of his own person (26:26–28). Nor is it likely, after Jesus' praise of mustard here, that this condiment will be missing from table at the eschatological wedding feast! For, if the King pays such attention to the wedding garment, surely he will not neglect the seasoning for his carefully fatted calves (cf. **22:1–14**)!

The essential meaning is as plain as it is profound: the authentic works of God always begin in a very small way; that the divine Presence and actions, therefore, are most likely to be either overlooked as non-existent or scorned as insignificant; for these reasons the person truly searching for God and his Kingdom must have not only a great desire for them but also equally great patience in order to wait for the full and incontestable development of God's work in our midst.

For a very long time, we may be unable to discern what growth or fruit will come from a given seed. We may also be misled by the apparent importance of larger seeds, as if what first appears more impressive will yield the richer and more enduring harvest. This parable turns life's expectations, the world's expectations on its ear. The might of the Roman Empire was no longer the standard. God's Kingdom has now been proclaimed and in Jesus of Nazareth direct divine rule established along the lines of the Sermon on the Mount

Remember! God sees all things differently

While human beings are often drawn according to their size and characteristics, God takes delight in what is small and hidden. In Jesus' thought, the Kingdom and smallness seem inseparable: *Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven* (**18:3**). Perhaps this is because God desires to fill all things with his goodness, and what is lowly offers him no resistance. Or perhaps smallness and hiddenness most closely reflect what God is in himself; when he comes into the world, he is naturally drawn to what resembles him: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven* (**5:3**). Thus, when Jesus speaks most faithfully of his Father's Kingdom, he repeatedly turns to the images of seeds, soil, and slow growth.

According to him, we are to find the entire *Kingdom of the heaven**s*** in a mere grain of mustard seed, which will stick to your hand inadvertently or fly off to the ground unnoticed.

We are baptised to be *shade* for the Children of God

A mustard "grain" is only a tiny part of the whole mustard seed itself. Yet the mustard bush can grow to three metres, and near the Lake of Galilee even to four. This small wonder of nature is enough for Jesus to make the living dynamism of the mustard seed an image not only of his Father's Kingdom, but also of faith itself*: If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain*, *"Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you* (**17:20**). To have "*the faith of a grain of mustard* seed" is to think small, gather one's energies in a single direction (Godward), and stop measuring one's faith and life) against that of others. It is to grow patiently and persistently, desiring only to become what God has placed in one's own nature, however humble it may seem. It is to receive gratefully every ray of sun and every hint of moisture. After a lifetime of such modest fidelity, the seed becomes a paradise where many may dwell. To become shade and refuge for others is our highest reward—and our noble vocation.

What is highest, most sublimely all-encompassing, and constitutes God's proper dwelling place— *the kingdom of the heavens*—is revealed by Jesus to be found in what is lowest, smallest, and best stimulates an earthly creature's desires. Where we are, He is.

God chooses what is "low and despised in the world" to bring forth life for us in Christ Jesus; and in this parable Jesus takes a grain of mustard seed and sows it in *his* field. Before the seed begins its own movement toward life, the farmer has already done his bit. Before what is "low and despised" is lifted into glory, God has freely intervened: he chooses what he will plant and causes it to prosper. The seed's nature can reach fulfilment only through the life and labour of the Sower, who enables it to realise its deepest potential. Unlike the Parable of the Sower, where seed is scattered in abundance, this parable centres on one mustard grain and the single tree that grows from it. From that one grain emerges a whole world of beautiful relationships. As it grows, the seed sends up a shoot, then a stalk, and finally branches. No sooner has it become a shrub than it continues its transformation: it "becomes a tree", and the whole world gathers in its shade.

…can anything separate us from the love of Christ?

In our parable of the Sower, the grain, the field, and the growth together constitute the Kingdom of the heavens. The tree grows until its branches fill the whole space of the field, for the field is the universe itself. This tree is none other than the one God planted in Eden at the beginning: *Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow … the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden* (**Gen 2:9).** Unlike the Tower of Babel, built by human hands, this Tree is called forth by God. It alone grants true access to divine life, joining earth and heaven through nature rather than technology. The parable teaches that heaven and earth are not opposed realities, but complementary dimensions of one unfolding plan of salvation.

Heaven—the dwelling place of God and the sanctuary of his mysteries—is discovered through contemplation of God's works and interventions on earth. We cannot, like Babel, force our own way upward to heaven (with Heaven being a way of speaking about God). The Kingdom of the heavens is found only when we recognise it as the fruit of ***God's*** own planting in the world, a field sown by him. The mustard grain and its world-filling growth are therefore an icon of creation itself: as we see in Genesis 1, God planted a grain of nothingness in the chaotic abyss, and from

it sprang a bustling, multi-coloured universe of harmony, which his delighted eyes found to be *very good and very beautiful* (**Gen 1:31a**).

the smallest of all seeds

The links between the cosmic tree (think the tree of life in the Garden of Eden) and a great kingdom has ancient biblical precedents that surely form the background for our parable. In the Book of Daniel, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar delivers to Daniel a disturbing dream he has had one that his own seers cannot interpret:

> *I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were fair and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the air dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.*

After listening attentively, Daniel replies to the great king: *The tree you saw … is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.* The beasts of the field and the birds of the air, according to Daniel, represent the far-flung kingdom of the Babylonian monarch and the myriad peoples it has united under one rule.

However, this mighty tree shall be chopped down, and only the stump shall be left, and the proud Nebuchadnezzar *shall be made to eat grass like an ox* and *shall be wet with the dew of heaven" till he learns "that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.… Your kingdom shall be sure for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.…*(**Dan 4:10–12, 20, 22, 25–27**).

Nebuchadnezzar's greatness began in personal ambition, and for that reason the magnificent "tree" of his person and kingdom had to be cut down and purged of arrogance. Only after this humiliation could it grow again from the remaining stump, once the king acknowledged himself as a mere instrument in the service of the King of the universe.

The Book of Ezekiel compares Pharaoh and Egypt to a majestic tree, *a cedar in Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade*. But this tree too is doomed*, because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height* (think Babel).

On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches will fall, and its boughs will lie broken in all the watercourses of the land; and all the peoples of the earth will flee from its shadow and leave it.… *All this in order that no trees by the waters may grow to lofty heights, … for they are all given over to death, to the nether world among mortal men, with those who go down to the Pit* (**Ezekiel 31:3, 10, 12b, 14ac**).

Golgotha, the Tree of Life and the tiny seed

By contrast to these passages from Daniel and Ezekiel, the very brevity of our parable effectively emphasises the eternally enduring nature of the "tree" of the Kingdom of Heaven. Since it begins unassumingly, with the humble awareness of having been planted by the divine Sower, the generous mustard tree shall never be hacked down, and the birds' finding shelter in its branches will continue forever. This is an everlasting tree whose vigour continues regardless of all cycles

of decline and decay because it gains its life and vitality directly from the **Sower**. Therefore, its branches are perpetually growing up toward the light, and its fruits shall never "g*o down to the Pit*" (hell). This, too, is why the Sower plants only one of its kind, a tiny mustard seed: an eternal, universal tree has grown, which can accommodate all the birds finding shelter.

Jesus' parable reveals the Messiah's vision. By coming among us and making his dwelling with us, he places every earthly kingdom in its proper perspective. From that moment on, their true purpose is to serve and prepare the way for God's Messianic Kingdom of justice and love. The Tree of this Kingdom stretches between earth and heaven, embodying the final order God intends. The world's salvation lies in the quiet growth of this Tree among us—at first hidden and unnoticed—until it surpasses every social and political order and all humanity finds shelter in its branches.

Kingship and kingdom were allowed by God, even in the case of Israel, but only as a temporary measure, a reluctant concession by God to human stubbornness and the political need for security. Israel was never called to be *like the other nations.* Her strength and might was her God, not their kings, armies, power and might. Human kingship was to be a temporary solution that would make do until the coming of the Messiah, the "anointed one". By rights only God himself is King of the Universe, and it is an essential part of Israel's faith to understand that every other kingship is in some sense idolatrous: *The Lord, the Highest, is terrible, a great king over all the earth.… Sing praises to our King, sing praises! God reigns over the nations; God hits on his holy throne (Psalm 46/47).*

In Jesus of Nazareth, God's Kingdom has arrived and is already at work: *"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!"* These are the first words spoken both by John the Baptist and by Jesus as each begins his ministry (**3:2, 4:17**). Yet the same proclamation has a different force in each case. John announces the Lord who is even now arriving (***cf. 3:3b***); Jesus, by contrast, announces himself. He makes this plain later when he declares: ***Something*** *greater than Solomon is here* (**13:42**). The unusual neutrality of "***something***" is deliberate. It points not merely to an individual human being, but to the whole mystical reality *this* unique person brings with him: the Kingdom of the heavens.

The triumph of this Kingdom over all the kingdoms of the world, moreover, did not occur as a mere changing of the guard, as it were, a smooth transition from expectation to reality, from promise to fulfillment, but rather as a result of the terrible confrontation between ancestral worldly power (both Jewish and pagan) and God's Anointed, Jesus of Nazareth, as witnessed in the dramatic prayer of the early Christian community:

"*Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Christ*" [Ps 2:1–2]*.… Now, Lord, … grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy child Jesus*. (Acts 4:25b–27, 29ac–30)

The boldness with which Christians are to speak God's Word to the world, come what may, and the signs and wonders that God's healing arm performs through them in the name of his Son Jesus, are nothing other than the privileges and abilities that the citizens of this Kingdom receive

by birthright, once the power of Jesus' own Spirit has been infused into them in response to their prayer (cf. **Acts 4:31**).

but when it has grown it becomes a tree…

Mesopotamian mythology, which provides the background for the biblical conception of Eden, conceived of a **Tree of Life** whose fruit confers immortality. In Genesis, this tree is a gift of God to man, planted in the middle of Paradise, accessible at any time. But Adam and Eve violated God's trust and sovereignty by eating from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and thus they lost their access to the Tree of Life as well. Life must be had from God on God's terms, which means it comes as a gift. God will not tolerate man's attempt to steal life and Wisdom from him, since these are preliminary steps to man's setting up a kingdom to rival God's.

The Tower of Babel and the multitude of bloody wars the world has seen flowing out in imitation of that monstrous construction, demonstrate that worldly kingdoms can be based only upon pride and ambition and that the result of these, without exception, is endless suffering and disaster. *The Lord God therefore banished [Adam] from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he had been taken. When he expelled the man, he settled him east of the garden of Eden; and he stationed the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life*.

The Word of God entered this world in person to bring back to his Father those who had alienated themselves from God through their sin and had therefore been driven far from God's presence and its joys. Jesus is the way back to the Tree of Life, which blossoms solely in that blessed place where God reigns as King in his Kingdom of peace, the place where God may freely dispense his life and his blessings and where these are continually received with thanksgiving and praise.

We had rendered the Tree of Life sterile by our disobedience. We had built a wall separating the hunger of our souls from the heavenly nourishment our Father had destined for us. But Jesus smashed his way through that wall; *he entered once for all into the Holy Place [where covenant was, holding the manna], taking … his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption* (**Heb 9:12**). The only way of giving back fruitfulness to the barren Tree of Life, which Jesus found gnarled and desolate after millennia of neglect, was for him to water it with the lifegiving blood of his own body, whose divine vigour was beyond destruction. The Tree of Life has been revealed in the Cross of the Lord.

On Golgotha, Eden's glorious Tree of Life and the dreadful Tree of the Cross became one and the same, because the Tree of the Cross was the altar upon which Jesus sacrificed himself, thereby gaining for us reconciliation with his Father and giving us himself in the Eucharist as chief fruit of this reconciliation. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree'—that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith* (**Gal 3:13–14)**.

The Cross as the Tree of Life

The obedience and love of Jesus taught the shrivelled and desiccated Tree of Life how to bud forth again, because, nestled in its branches and applying a secret known only to himself, he reduced our rebellion and despair into fruits of holiness: *He himself carried up our sins in his*

body to the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed **(1 Pet 2:24**).
Only God can bring life out of the death that men inflict; and so the Father subjected his only Son to death so that, after we had killed him by hanging him on a tree, the Father might raise him from the dead (cf. **Acts 5:30; 13:29–30**).

The power and glory and beauty of Jesus' love alone could transform the rough wood that had transformed him into the magnificent, life-bearing Tree of Paradise. Here we have a worthy representation of the Tree of Life that the seer of the Apocalypse saw growing by *the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*.

This Tree wholly surpasses in beauty and abundance the lost Tree of Eden, since this Tree of God's Kingdom has *twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. Indeed, in the whole sphere radiating out from this Tree, "there shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and the Lamb shall be in it.… And night shall be no more, … for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.… Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the Tree of Life*" (**Rev 22:1–3a, 5ac, 14**).

…the birds of the sky come and roost in its branches

This tree, which has grown from the tiny mustard seed of a divine word whispered by Gabriel to Mary (cf. **Lk 1:26–38**), is both Jesus glorified and his Kingdom, both the Head and the Body, since Jesus is the one in whose Heart all creation find life and light (cf. **Jn 1:4; Mt 11:28**) just as surely as all the birds of the sky come to roost snugly in the branches of the cosmic tree. This is why St. Paul can construct the unusual phrases that characterize his bold thought: "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, **in whom we have redemption***" (**Col 1:13**); "*you must consider yourselves … as having your life for God in Christ Jesus"* (**Rom 6:11**).

The Christian sense of living in a state of mutual interdependence with Christ lends a new concreteness to the ancient dictum: ***In him** we live and move and have our being* (**Acts 17:28**)—a particularly apt portrait of birds fluttering and nesting within a tree! Paul speaks of the Redeemer as if he were a "place" wherein to exist and live out one's life, which indeed is precisely what he is in a very real sense.

The prophetic identification we have seen of the kings of Babylon and Egypt with the trees that represented their kingdoms has borne unexpected fruit here in the equivalence between the everlasting **Tree of God's Kingdom of righteousness** (cf. Rom 5:21) and **the Mystical Body of Christ**. For this reason, the Church's prayer during the Easter Octave—the one Great Day of Easter—begins with **Psalm 1**, since she sees in her Risen Lord the blessed *Righteousness*, or *the Righteous Man*, par excellence. In his Passion he showed that he walks not in the counsel of the wicked … but his delight is in the law of the Lord. Therefore, Christ Jesus "is a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (**Ps 1:1ab, 2a, 3**).

In Christ our lives will bear abundant fruit

By implanting our fallen nature into his Divine Person, the risen Jesus floods our mortality with the water of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5; 4:14); and so the tree of Jesus' love has abounded in

fruits of grace, *so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord* (**Rom 5:21**). The glorious and fruitful Cross forever stands at the centre of this Paradise that is the Kingdom established by the Messiah born of Mary, and the branches of this Tree in fact constitute *the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all* (**Eph 1:22b–23**) with all of the divine vigour he brings to his mission from his Father. Everything that Emmanuel does prospers; and his leaves, which are also our leaves never wither because they are nourished by the power of his Resurrection. He is the beloved Son in whom his Father is well pleased (cf. 3:17b), whom the Father has therefore raised from the dead because it was not possible in the end for death to triumph over him.

To him the Father has said: *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession* (**Ps 2:7b–8**). These nations are the grateful birds that come to dwell in his branches, those that Jesus himself had in mind when he compared his disciples to the free inhabitants of the sky that rely only on God's providence for life and sustenance: *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they*? (**6:26**). 'And has your Father, who is also my Father therefore not offered you a nesting place in my Church and given you in my person Bread from heaven to eat?

As the innocent babes of God's new creation in the blood of the Lamb (**cf. 1 Pet 2:2**), as the children of the new Jerusalem whom the Savior has yearned to gather together *as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings* (**23:37b**), we too can intone our song of praise from our lofty perch in the branches of the Church, with the very words of the psalm that Jesus here puts on our lips (**13:32c**).

In union with the incarnate Word, the Lord of the universe who is *the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth* (**Rev 1:5a**), we bless the Father who toils so marvellously, pouring upon us torrents of grace and cultivating the life and beauty of all his dear cosmos:

> *Bless the Lord, O my soul!*
> *O Lord my God, thou art very great!…*
> *Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys;*
> *they flow between the hills,*
> *they give drink to every beast of the field;*
> *the wild asses quench their thirst.*
> *By them the birds of the air have their habitation;*
> *they sing among the branches.*
> *From thy lofty abode thou waterest the mountains;*
> *the earth is sated with the fruit of thy work.…*
> *Bless the Lord, O my soul!*
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> (**Ps 103[104]:1a, 10–13, 35a**)