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Matthew 13:31–32—Why a Mustard Seed?

(Comments from Church Tradition)

In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus tells a parable about a mustard seed.

Matthew 13:31–32	Mark 4:30–32	Luke 13:18–19
He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”	He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”	He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

Most interpreters have assumed Jesus chose a mustard seed for this illustration because of the obvious difference between the size of the seed (about the size of a grain of salt) and the mature plant (a shrub the size of a small tree). He might have made a similar point in modern America with an acorn and an oak tree.

From the early church on, however, some interpreters have tried to find something specific about “mustard” to extract additional meaning from the saying. Further, the mere fact that a seed is buried before it produces growth suggested imagery of death and resurrection, either of Jesus’s followers or of Jesus himself.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 250):

The word which proclaims the kingdom of heaven is sharp and pungent as mustard. It represses bile (anger) and checks inflammation (pride). From this word flows the soul's true vitality and fitness for eternity. To such increased size did the growth of the word come that the tree which sprang from it (that is the Church of Christ now being established over the whole earth) filled the world, so that the birds of the air (that is, holy angels and lofty souls) dwelt in its branches. (*Fragments from the Catena of Nicetas, Bishop of Heraclea* 4)¹

Ambrose (347–397):

Its seed is indeed very plain, and of little value; but if bruised or crushed it shows forth its power. So faith first seems a simple thing; but if it is bruised by its enemies it gives forth proof of its power, so as to fill others who hear or read of it with the odor of its sweetness. Our martyrs, Felix, Nabor and Victor, possessed the sweet odor of faith; but they dwelt in "obscurity. When the persecution came, they laid down their arms, and bowed their necks, and being stricken by the sword they diffused to all the ends of the earth the grace of their martyrdom. . . . The Lord himself is the grain of mustard seed. He was without injury; but the people were unaware of him as a grain of mustard seed of which they took no notice. He chose to be bruised, that we might say: "For we are the good odor of Christ unto God." ("Sermon on 'The Grain of the Mustard Seed'")²

Also, “seed” can have sexual connotations, but would that be pressing the analogy too far? To speak of Jesus impregnating his bride, the church? Let’s see.

Peter Chrysologus (406–450):

Yes, it is true: a mustard seed is indeed an image of the kingdom of God. Christ is the kingdom of heaven. Sown like a mustard seed in the garden of the virgin’s womb, he grew up into the tree of the cross whose branches stretch across the world. Crushed in the mortar of the passion, its fruit has produced seasoning enough for the flavoring and preservation of every living creature with which it comes in contact. As long as a mustard seed remains intact, its properties lie dormant; but when it is crushed they are exceedingly evident. So it was with Christ; he chose to have his body crushed, because he would not have his power concealed. . . . The man Christ received the mustard seed which represents the kingdom of God; as man he received it, though as God he had always possessed it. He sowed it in his garden, that is in his bride, the Church. The Church is a garden extending over the whole world, tilled by the plough of the gospel, fenced in by stakes of doctrine and discipline, cleared of every harmful weed by the labor of the apostles, fragrant and lovely with perennial flowers: virgins’ lilies and martyrs’ roses set amid the pleasant verdure of all who bear witness to Christ and the tender plants of all who have faith in him. Such then is the mustard seed which Christ sowed in his garden. When he promised a kingdom to the patriarchs, the seed took root in them; with the prophets it

sprang up; with the apostles it grew tall; in the Church it became
a great tree putting forth innumerable branches laden with gifts.

(Sermon 98)³

1. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885–96), 2:578.

2. M. F. Toal, trans. and ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading, and Meditation*, 4 vols. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 1:349.

3. E. Barnecut, ed., *Journey with the Fathers: Commentaries on the Sunday Gospels*, Year B (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 90–91.