

8. The Sermon by the Sea

Mark 4:3-32, minus later additions

Having pared the commandments down to their essentials, Jesus came to Galilee. He violated the Sabbath. He argued purity rules with the Pharisees. He associated with sinners, since that was where the work was: preaching to the already saved would not alter the proportion of the saved in Israel, and the whole point was that a majority of Israel should come to be obedient to God. Jesus therefore went among the unsaved.

But secretly. The program was anti-Roman, and so the message must be preached in veiled terms. Nor would Jesus do all the preaching; each must tell his neighbor, and he his neighbor. Only in that way could the message spread, not just in Galilee, but to diaspora Jews in the far ends of the Empire.

Jesus is here talking to his converts, who have been spreading the Word, but are discouraged at the slight results of their efforts. Not everyone believes. What does that mean? When does it go public? What will happen when it does?

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell among the path, and the birds came and devoured it, Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and straightway it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil, And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. And he said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret, except to come to light. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear.

The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, straightway he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.



Reflections

As Mark says, “*with many such parables* spake he the word unto them.” That is, this is not a single-occasion sermon; it is a gathering of comparisons Jesus used to encourage his converts on many occasions. These were reported to Mark (himself a resident of Jerusalem) by someone at the Galilee end, and Mark has put them together. A second-century bishop, Papias of Hierapolis, criticized Mark for his lack of narrative order. That is quite right. This is why: Mark didn’t have the details. And on this occasion, Mark probably found it effective to cluster some reported sayings together, to make a sermon.

Though indirectly expressed, the advice is easily decoded. To paraphrase:

Look what happens when you plant seed. Some is lost; some never bears fruit. Some of your preaching fails, some convert later turns cold. But the converts who are fruitful will more than make up for the others.

This thing is secret now; it has to be. But it will not always be secret. The whole point of this effort is to become manifest later on.

It has its own momentum; God is returning. Your effort is important, but whatever that result may be, when the time is ripe, God will appear.

When he does, our efforts will become a great blessing, giving shelter to many. The birds who have flown far will find a home again in Israel.

With this sort of encouragement, and with each telling others (we might call it contact missionarizing), the movement did spread far. It spread from house to house and from town to town. Within months it had reached the great cities: Alexandria in the south, Antioch in the north, Sinope up on the Black Sea, Ephesus on the Aegean, Philippi in Macedonia, Corinth in Achaia, Rome itself.

Wherever the named Apostles like Paul later went, these nameless sowers had brought the Word there before them. Alexandria was producing converts like Apollos, learned in Scripture (and since he was from an Alpha church, he had to be reinstructed in Beta by Paul’s assistants).¹ Corinth had its “Christ” party, not associated with any named Apostle but only with the name of Jesus.² Those in Philippi had their hymn of Jesus ascending to Heaven. The seed had been planted in the Thirties, and by the Forties, when we begin to know of named Apostles, the plants were already growing all over the Mediterranean.

Not everyone was convinced, as the metaphor of the sower makes plain. More than that; some were alarmed.

¹Acts 18:24-28; see Chapter 28. Apollos was fully converted to Paul’s views, and later wrote the thoroughly Beta Epistle to the Hebrews.

²1 Corinthians 1:12; see Chapter 32. The other parties at Corinth were those of Paul, Apollos, and Peter.