

Preposterous seed stories

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On first reading, the two parables in today's Gospel text seem to make less and less sense. In the first, a sower seems to leave the seed to fend for itself. In the second, a tiny mustard seed becomes a bush large enough for its branches to provide shelter for birds. (In Matthew's telling, it's a full-size tree!) When we stop to think about it, both parables are preposterous.

But then, so are many of the parables of Jesus. They are literally pre-posterous, placing the last (*posterous*) first (*pre*)--or, as we would say today, claiming that the cart goes ahead of the horse.

This is so because Jesus is speaking of a different order. Both parables are introduced as illustrations of "the kingdom of God." In the first, the different order of God's reign lies hidden in all its fullness in a small seed. In the second, a tiny seed brings forth an unexpectedly large bush.

In the first, the sower plants the seed and then lets it grow till harvest time. In a way, this is one of the many "parables of absence": a man plants a vineyard and leaves it to others; another entrusts his wealth to his servants and goes away to a distant land; a groom does not show up when expected. Here, the sower simply allows the seed to grow as it has been programmed until he returns to the field.

In the second parable, the reign of God seems to be nothing but an insignificant mustard seed, and yet it is to grow and turn out to be the largest of bushes. And, as

with any seed, in a way the large bush is already hidden in the small seed.

But Jesus is not speaking of the reign of God in abstract and general terms, as any one of us might do. He is speaking of a reign of God which he is also promising and ushering in.

The one who thus speaks is the one who was born a tiny mustard seed to a poor family in a fairly peripheral province of a vast empire. He has nowhere to lay his head. He is speaking to a motley crew of fisherfolk, tax collectors, and others whom he has made his disciples. And he is telling them that the mustard seed will grow to become a bush, and that this bush will provide shelter for birds thousands of times larger than the seed itself.

And what is true of Jesus is also reflected in his disciples. Those who are listening to him are just tiny mustard seeds amidst the forest of society. Yet they too, in imitation of their master, will grow in unexpected ways. They will even provide shelter for birds, from whom seeds must usually hide.

Ridiculous! Revolutionary! But gospel truth.