A talk on Mark 4: 26-34 - its not as it seems

There are two parables in the Mark passage. The first is not as commonly known or referenced. But it is simple. Someone scatters seeds, and like all of us, has very little understanding of how nature might work in the biology of growing, and then is pleased when a crop appears.   
Guessing as to the meaning that Jesus is expressing – is this about God will accomplish things and we will have little understanding as to how or why.

The parable of the mustard seed has always baffled me. I know what mustard seeds are. I cook with them in making pickles, I have sprouted them and I have seen the plants growing wild.

⬤ There must be something lost in translation. Surely Jesus did not mean the mustard seed that I know.

⬤ It must be some other plant! The mustard seed is not the smallest seed. Some other seeds are just dust in comparison. I can remember Pam upset because she tipped out the seeds of Lobelia into her hand and discarded the dust- not realising that Lobelia seeds are like dust.   
The mustard plant does not grow into the tallest tree that supports the nests of birds. ⬤ It is a bendy invasive weed. Jesus’ listeners would have known this.

It seems as if Jesus was having a lend of them. It’s only us that don’t get it. They all would have been familiar with the Ezekiel passage that we will read soon. It speaks of grand days when Israel will be great. – A great cedar planted as a twig and nurtured by the Lord.   
Strong and dominant, a support for others.

I’m very thankful for the chance to come to grips with this passage as I never really understood the meaning of the parable. You can decide for yourselves if I have interpreted it correctly. Jesus has deliberately parodied the Ezekiel passage. Chapter 17

⬤ Thus says the Lord GOD:  
I myself will take a sprig  
from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one  
from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it  
on a high and lofty mountain.  
On the mountain height of Israel  
I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,  
and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live;  
in the shade of its branches will nest  
winged creatures of every kind.

So similar to the lines in the gospel of Mark chapter 4

⬤ It is like a 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.’

He’s playing with his audience. He’s probably using the sight of a barren patch of ground infested with mustard weed to make his point.

The disciples and listeners might get that he is dealing with people’s expectations. ⬤ **It’s not as it seems.** If you join in with Jesus the outcome might not be the strong cedar on the highest mountain but the bendy, temporary mustard plant on some unwanted land. You won’t be joining a group that will give you notoriety or power. The Christian walk is one of insignificance and self-defacing.

Michael, last week, told us of the book that challenged the ’Normal’. Jesus pointed out that the dominant culture is not always correct and beyond challenge. Think of his upsetting the tables of the money changers in the temple. Consider our own plans and then in March 2020 CoVid hit and plans all go awry. Isn’t this like the scattering of seed and then being surprised by the outcome, expected or unexpected.

From the Paul’s first letter to the new Christians in Corinth, one of the Greek cities and a great trading port.  
⬤ *And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

Importantly - ***From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;*** We seemingly have new eyes in this new creation.

Church history is, indeed, filled with times when the church wished and became the dominant culture. Think of the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic Church up to the reformation or even the Anglican Church, (Church of England) in Tudor times. You could even stretch it to the church’s influence in politics in Australia in the early days of colonisation or in the 1950s, or the evangelical influence in USA today.

Jesus is saying that power or adulation is not what we seek. Maybe the church should be the annoying weed that springs up and challenges people. Jesus and early Christianity was the threat to the worldly ways of the dominant culture built on greed and coercion. Jesus could be regarded, himself, as the mustard plant to eradicate.

Joining a church. You won’t be noticed among the ruling elite. You haven’t joined movement seeking dominance and power. Maybe we’re annoying weeds. Jesus’ message is one of challenge to those in power. –

Consider servanthood, even for the leaders in the church or nation.   
Consider rejecting tough stances but including understanding and compassion.

⬤ Jesus is talking amidst the Roman Empire dominated by Roman and Greek culture. Empires, by definition, control and demand cooperation. They exude authority, like Ezekiel’s image of the giant cedar. Jesus is turning the expectation on its head. The Messiah won’t be coming sword in hand to subdue some ruling power or arrogant neighbouring culture. Israel under the Messiah won’t be the dominating power. In fact, Jesus came on a donkey and on entering Jerusalem turned towards the temple and not the seat of power, Herod’s palace.

In all we do, whether it be  
 in our family life,   
 our attempts to right wrongs or abusive situations  
 or even in the life of our church  
the message is not to be looking at becoming the most glorious, dominant tree in the cloud-covered heights  
but to be grounded, challenging and unruly weed that can grow anywhere and eventually break apart concrete.

The new mindset does not look to impressive credentials which people can muster to claim the adulation of their fellows and so make their lives meaningful and valuable. Instead, the new kind of being, believes in being loved and being set free from self-preoccupation with one's own worth.

And the Mark passage for today ends with –

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.”

May his parables continue to disturb us and awaken us to God’s love and life and all it means for our world.

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