

Expository Tracts, No. 27.

THE
GRAIN OF MUSTARD.

BEING

THOUGHTS ON MARK IV. 30-34.

BY THE LATE RIGHT REV.

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THE GRAIN OF MUSTARD

MARK IV. 3–34.

- 30 And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God; or with what comparison shall we compare it?
31 *It is* like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth:
32 But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.
33 And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear *it*.
34 But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.

THE parable of the mustard seed is one of those parables which partake of the character both of history and prophecy. It seems intended to illustrate the history of Christ's visible Church on earth, from the time of the first advent down to the judgment day. The seed "cast into the earth" (Mark iv. 26–29), in the preceding parable, showed us the work of grace in a heart. The mustard seed shows us the progress of professing Christianity in the world.

We learn, in the first place, that, like the grain of mustard seed, *Christ's visible Church was to be small and weak in its beginnings.*

A grain of mustard seed was a proverbial expression among the Jews for something very small and insignificant. Our Lord calls it "less than all the seeds that be in the earth." Twice in the Gospels we find our Lord using the figure as a word of comparison, when speaking of a weak faith. (Matt. xvii. 20; Luke xvii. 6.) The idea was doubtless familiar to a Jewish mind, however strange it may sound to us. Here, as in other places, the Son of God shows us the wisdom of using language familiar to the minds of those whom we address.

It would be difficult to find an emblem which more faithfully represents the history of the visible Church of Christ than this grain of mustard seed.

Weakness and apparent insignificance were undoubtedly the characteristics of its beginning. How did its Head and King come into the world? He came as a feeble infant, born in a manger at Bethlehem, without riches, or armies, or attendants, or power.—Who were the men that the Head of the Church gathered round Himself, and appointed His apostles? They were poor and unlearned persons,—fishermen, publicans, and men of like occupations, to all appearance the most unlikely people to shake the world.—What was the last public act of the earthly ministry of the great Head of the Church? He was crucified, like a malefactor, between two thieves, after having been forsaken by nearly all His disciples, betrayed by one, and denied by another.—What was the doctrine which the first builders of the Church went forth from the upper chamber in Jerusalem to preach to mankind? It was a

doctrine which, to the Jews, was a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. It was a proclamation that the great Head of their new religion had been put to death on a cross; and that notwithstanding this, they offered life through His death to the world!—In all this the mind of man can perceive nothing but weakness and feebleness. Truly the emblem of the grain of mustard seed was verified and fulfilled to the very letter. To the eyes of man the beginning of the visible Church was contemptible, insignificant, powerless, and small.

We learn, in the second place, that, like the mustard seed, *the visible Church, once planted, was to grow and greatly increase.*

“The grain of mustard seed,” says our Lord, “when it is sown, groweth up and becometh greater than all herbs.” These words may sound startling to an English ear. We are not accustomed to such a growth in our cold northern climate. But to those who know eastern countries and tropical air, there is nothing surprising in it. The testimony of well-informed and experienced travellers is distinct, that such an increase is both possible and probable.

No figure could be chosen more strikingly applicable to the growth and increase of Christ’s visible Church in the world. It began to grow from the day of Pentecost, and grew with a rapidity which nothing can account for but the finger of God. It grew wonderfully when three thousand souls were converted at once, and five thousand more in a few days afterwards.—It grew wonderfully when, at Antioch, and Ephesus, and Philippi, and Corinth, and Rome, congregations were gathered together, and Christianity firmly established.—It grew wonderfully when, at last, the despised religion of Christ overspread the greater part of Europe, and Asia Minor, and North Africa; and, in spite of fierce persecution and opposition, supplanted heathen idolatry, and became the professed creed of the whole Roman empire. Such growth must have been marvellous in the eyes of many. But it was only what our Lord foretold in the parable before us. “The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed.”

The visible Church of Christ has not yet done growing. Notwithstanding the melancholy apostasy of some of its branches, and the deplorable weakness of others, it is still extending and expanding over the world. New branches have continually been springing up in America, in India, in Australia, in Africa, in China, in the Islands of the South Seas, during the last fifty years. Evils undoubtedly there are many. False profession and corruption abound. But still, on the whole, heathenism is waning, wearing out, and melting away. In spite of all the predictions of Voltaire and Payne, in spite of foes without and treachery within, the visible Church progresses,—the mustard plant still grows.

And the prophecy, we may rest assured, is not yet exhausted. A day shall yet come when the great Head of the Church shall take to Himself His power,

and reign, and put down every enemy under His feet. The earth shall yet be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. xi. 9.) Satan shall yet be bound. The heathen shall yet be our Lord's inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth His possession. And then this parable shall receive its full accomplishment. The little seed shall become "a great tree," and fill the whole earth. (Dan. ii. 35.)

Let us leave the parable with a resolution never to despise any movement or instrumentality in the Church of Christ, because at first it is weak and small. Let us remember the manger of Bethlehem, and learn wisdom. The name of Him who lay there, a helpless infant, is now known all over the globe. The little seed which was planted in the day when Jesus was born has become a great tree, and we ourselves are rejoicing under its shadow. Let it be a settled principle in our religion never to "despise the day of small things." (Zech. iv. 10.) One child may be the beginning of a flourishing school, one conversion the beginning of a mighty Church, one word the beginning of some blessed Christian enterprise, one seed the beginning of a rich harvest of saved souls.