

On your marks

The parables of Jesus have always fascinated and inspired Christians with their outward simplicity but their hidden depths of meaning. They offer surprising twists and paradoxes that challenge our thinking about the kingdom of God. One of the most well-known is the parable of the mustard seed. It is only two verses long but has intrigued and puzzled people again and again.

The following storytelling outline opens up new insights as it connects this parable with other stories from the Bible. It can be used either as a talk in all-age worship or as the basis for a session with children on their own.

BRF's Barnabas in Churches is grateful to Lisa Cherrett for this tried-and-tested idea.

Get set

You can find the story in Luke 13:18-19, Matthew 13:31-32 or Mark 4:30-32.

You will need:

- Some mustard seeds (a small jar can be bought from a supermarket)
- A tall household plant or small bush in a pot
- Three large labels with the words, 'I'll do it' written clearly on one, 'Here, take this' on another, and 'Yes, it's true' on the third
- Sticky tape

Go!

Who wants to see what I've got in my hand?

It's a mustard seed. Isn't it tiny? One day, Jesus said a very strange thing. He said that the kingdom of God is like... a mustard seed. It's a tiny little seed, but when it's planted, it grows into a bush about nine feet tall, so big that birds can come and make nests in its branches.

Can you imagine what something nine feet tall looks like? Who's six feet tall? Stand up, please! Imagine half a [John] sitting on top of [John] [or whoever]. That's how tall a bush you'd get from a mustard seed this small.

I'll like someone to trap this mustard seed on a piece of tape and stick it at the bottom of this bush/plant.

Encourage a volunteer to come forward.

So what did Jesus mean when he said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? Well, I've got a rhyme for you to learn, that tells you what he meant:

**Where God's in charge,
Small things grow large.
And in God's hand,
Small gifts expand.**

I'm going to tell you three stories from the Bible. They're all true stories - they really happened - and in each of the stories there's a mustard seed hidden. I'll give you a clue: the mustard seed is hidden in something that somebody says. So listen hard to the stories, and see if you can spot the tiny mustard seed that God made grow into something big.

One day, Jesus was talking to two new friends, called Peter and Andrew. He was talking to them in their boat, because Peter and Andrew were fishermen. They'd been fishing all night, and they hadn't caught so much as a tadpole. They felt really fed up and useless. But Jesus said, 'Peter, go and let your net down again in the middle of the lake.'

What did Peter say? He said something like this: 'Well, Jesus, that's the stupidest idea I've ever heard. The fish are all asleep by now. But you're in charge, so I'll do it.' And when Peter dropped the net into the water, so many fish swam into that net that the fishermen could hardly pull them all into the boat.

Did anyone notice the mustard seed? Three small words: **'I'll do it!'** And when Peter did what Jesus asked him to do, all those fish started swimming into the net as fast as they could.

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Ask someone to stick the label with the words 'I'll do it' to the base of the bush/plant.

Another day, Jesus was talking to thousands of people out in the hills, quite a long way from the nearest town. Jesus talked for so long, and everyone was so interested in what he was saying, that lunch time came and went, and everyone got really hungry. Jesus's best friends wanted to send the people off to the shops to buy their lunch, but Jesus said, 'No, we'll feed them another way.'

There was one little boy in the crowd who had a packed lunch. What do you think he had for his lunch? A packet of crisps and a can of Coke? No, five bread rolls and two fishes! That little boy brought his packed lunch to Jesus and said, 'Here, take this!'

Jesus said 'thank you' to God for it and then started breaking bits off and handing them round to the people. And he just carried on breaking bits off those five bread rolls and two fishes until everyone in the enormous crowd had had enough to eat.

Did anyone notice the mustard seed? Three small words: **'Here, take this!'** And when the little boy gave his lunch to Jesus, Jesus made it stretch!

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I've got just one more story to tell you. Who's ever tried to count the stars? You can't do it, can you? You just keep losing count. Well, years and years before Jesus was born, there was a man called Abraham. One night, Abraham was standing outside, looking up at the starry sky, and he heard God whisper into his mind, 'I know you haven't got any children now, Abraham, but one day you'll have as many great-great-great-great-ever-so-many-great-grandchildren as there are stars in the sky.'

And what did Abraham say? He said, 'Yes, that's true!' He believed what God said, and it did come true. Abraham's wife Sarah had a baby boy, even though she was really too old to have babies, and that baby boy grew up to have children. Over the years, Abraham's great-great-great-great-ever-so-many-great-grandchildren came to be a whole country full of people - and in fact Jesus was one of those people.

Where was the hidden mustard seed? Three small words: **'Yes, it's true!'** When Abraham believed what God promised him, God kick-started a plan to make a world full of people who loved him.

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So what does it mean for us, that where God's in charge, something as tiny as this seed can become something really big and good?

It means that even the smallest thing you do because you love Jesus can be really important in God's hands. Perhaps there's a boy or girl at school who hasn't got any friends, and perhaps God will say to you, 'Say hello to that person.' It might sound like a silly idea, but if you say, 'I'll do it', you might find that you end up helping that person not to be lonely, and making a really good friend for yourself too.

Perhaps, as a grown-up, there's one thing that you can do really well, like running or singing or playing an instrument or writing stories. We call that a talent. If you say to Jesus, 'Here, take this,' and give him that talent, he'll help you to be the best you can possibly be at it, and he'll show you how to use it in big ways to please him.

Or perhaps there's something that God is saying to you. Perhaps he's saying, 'Hey, I want to be your best friend and forgive you for everything you've done wrong, and make your life really excellent.'



And if you think, 'Yes, that's true!' God will do as he says and show you all sorts of exciting things about him as you grow up.

In fact, any time you pray and speak to Jesus, or any time you tell Jesus you love him, even if it's just a little prayer, it means a lot to him, and he'll make your love for him and your belief in him grow bigger and stronger every day.

So remember the tiny mustard seed that grows into an enormous bush, and remember our rhyme:

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