



Second Sunday after Trinity  
Sunday 17 June 2012

---

## Business Ethics and the Mustard Seed

A sermon by Revd Will Morris

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 5.6-10, 14-17; Mark 4.26-34**

This is a mustard seed. I'm guessing that most of you can't see it, so here's a bag with a hundred mustard seeds in it. Still not much. And yet it was to this and grains of corn that Jesus compared the kingdom of God in today's Gospel reading. We hear these parables so often that we tend to reduce them to something very simple – in this case something small becomes something very big, or perhaps something humble can become the kingdom of God – and move on. I think there's more to it than that, but I'm going to put aside my mustard seed for a moment and set out in a slightly different direction.

You'll have seen in the newspapers this week, stories on the pay of top executives and also on how the tax authorities did – or didn't – cosy up to big business. Both stories bring back to the boil the issue of business ethics – how should businesses behave – that has now been simmering since the start of the financial crisis. For me the kingdom of God potentially includes the world of work. So these stories again make me wonder what would best enable us to lead a "good" life; an ethical life? What are the conditions in which we can flourish ethically? To start to answer that, however, I think we need first to ask an even bigger question. Are we as human beings basically bad, but with a capacity for good if properly constrained and channelled? Or are we as human beings basically good, but with a capacity for being bad when tempted? What's the difference you might ask? Either way, don't we end up in the same place, all of our lives a mixture of good and bad, striving and failure? Well, perhaps not. I think which approach we take really does matter in some important and very practical ways, because it profoundly affects how we structure our society, as well as how we think about God.

If we think humans are basically bad, but can be channelled into good, then we are more likely to have lots of restrictive laws which prevent people from doing bad things; which control their behaviour; which punish them if they transgress. So, the role of the state, or of God, under this worldview is largely coercive and mistrusting. But if the view is that we are in some way good, but with a capacity to do bad under the wrong circumstances, then we might organise things in a different way. The law becomes something which fences off serious temptation, fences off areas where people can hurt and be hurt. It acknowledges that bad can, and very often does, happen. But inside those fenced-off outer limits, the absence of law gives individuals and communities the room to make their own decisions, the room to grow as human beings – and to respond freely, creatively, to the grace of God.

So to bring this back to the question of how to encourage a place where ethics will grow, the high level answers – particularly here in church – might seem obvious. For example, we should try to apply the teachings of Jesus to our lives, including our work lives. But to state the theory, the principle is the easy part. The real issue is how we translate that into practical applications for the everyday world. How do we move from theory to practice? Well, it's here that question about more good than bad, and vice versa, is important. I know that we are all sinners who can do nothing without God's grace (I know I certainly am), but I do also believe that we are beings with a spark of good that can be fanned into flame, rather than fallen creatures who must be whipped into shape. So for me, there are two parts to a possible answer. First we have to create the right conditions, the

right structure where ethical behaviour becomes not only possible but becomes the norm. And then we need people, as individuals, to take advantage of that.

To create the right conditions we need a framework, a protective structure – whatever you want to call it – inside which we have space, the luxury almost, of making ethical decisions. Part of this is purely physical. If we are to do more than simply survive, we need to be free from worries about things like crime, because only with a level of security and certainty can we make ethical decisions – without that security life is just instinct and survival. But while such a framework provides security it also, by the same token, provides outer boundaries. If we know that we cannot go beyond a certain point then some temptation will be removed.

But for that to be a truly creative space the boundaries need to be far enough apart that we have a real choice within them. We will not grow morally, spiritually, if we are forced to live our lives by a system of prescriptive, coercive rules. We will either become like the Scribes and Pharisees, so focussed on the letter of the law that we forget its purpose and meaning. Or we will follow the law in its detail because we will be punished if we don't, not because we have decided to on the basis of what is right and wrong. Neither of those approaches stretches us as human beings, because we make no decisions. We simply follow the rules.

That's probably all a little too abstract, so let me try an example. Let's take executive pay. If we set no real boundaries at all, we find ourselves in the current situation where the only real limits are "whatever the market will bear" – which appears to be almost anything. That presents no ethical choice because no boundaries are defined. Likewise, we could have a rule that says the head of a company shall be paid 20 times the salary of the lowest paid worker. That, too, leaves no real grounds for an ethical decision. It may be a better, fairer result. However, it's not the result of an ethical decision. But I really do believe that somewhere in the middle is the possibility of creativity. What if we said, for example, that in setting the pay of company bosses, the difference between the salaries of the lowest paid and highest paid must be considered and justified in public. This would force the boss and those who set his or her pay to consider other less fortunate people, and not just in a pro forma, box-ticking way, but in a way that they would have to speak to in public. Because no specific decision is forced – other than the necessity of considering and justifying the decision – it becomes an ethical decision. It considers what is right, what is wrong. And in making that decision we have the possibility for growth. Growing towards our neighbours – and, thereby, growing, even if only in a very small way, the kingdom of God on earth.

So to come back to my mustard seed. It certainly feels – at least in some sectors – that the ethical dimension of business is as small as this seed. But what I think the parables tell us is that in the right conditions – even if we don't fully understand how – these very small beginnings, this minute speck of goodness, may grow into something much more important, much more substantial. We need the right conditions, good soil in the parable, that level of security and the placing of outer boundaries that I was describing before. But we also need the time and space, again as the parables say, for that seed – for ethical creativity – to germinate and grow. If we are to be full human beings then it is essential that we make decisions, not just accept rules. We have the capacity to make bad decisions or good ones. We can always go wrong. But, under the right conditions, with the right encouragement, through prayer, and with the grace of God, we can make this speck of goodness grow into something great – something like the kingdom of God.

Amen.