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It may be true that in Jesus' day farmers did not understand the whole process of how a plant develops. The farming lore they operated by could very well have contained myths and stories and ways of doing things that modern farmers would only shake their heads at.

We know much more about plant science than was available in the first century. But some things have not changed.

In spite of the fact that modern farming makes good use of science-based agricultural techniques, the vocation of a farmer still contains that element of recognition that the whole endeavor is really outside of the farmer's control.

You can make the best use of all you know and still have to trust that the rains will come when needed and the crop will be there when the growing season ends.

Jesus did not have a degree in agriculture, but he knew enough about farming to recognize that the farmer has to give himself over to a process that beyond his control. And that aspect of farming was the one that lent itself to using planting and waiting to talk about a completely different reality: the plan God has to establish his kingdom on the earth.

That, too, contains elements that we can readily identify—working for peace and justice, attending to the needs of the poor and lowly, making sure that all people have what they need to live lives in keeping with their human dignity, preserving the integrity of

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creation for the sake of generations to come—all these things are within our power affect now, but the kingdom of God will be that and more, and that “more” is something we have to trust God to supply.

Jesus knew that he was called to make present the reign of God and his words and actions were intended to plant seeds that would bear fruit somewhere down the road.

And yet, there were a lot of things happening that might have made him wonder about whether there would be a harvest. His preaching and teaching and even his healing ministry quickly won him mortal enemies. His disciples were slow to understand.

Perhaps it was this very personal experience of his, of all the barriers to his work that led him to tell a parable about the importance of being patient because what he and the disciples were hoping for and the results of their work were beyond their control.

When it comes to the spiritual life trying to force the growth of grace is as futile as yanking on a plant to make it grow faster. If we take Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders of his day as an example there’s not even a sure-fire way of creating an atmosphere that’s conducive to God’s reigning. It’s out of our hands.

You may have heard that I was recently elected to the provincial council of my province. I’ve been on it before, but this time I’m the old guy. Three of the other councilors are all friars that were students of mine in formation. Will you believe me when I say

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that I have heard more than a few stories about things I said and things I did when I was a formation director?

During that whole time seeds were being planted. Some of them intentionally. Some of them by accident. And in some cases the seed planted generated fruit that I had no idea was even possible. These friars have taken what I and many others have planted and allowed them to grow into lives fit to be called Christian.

Therein lies the paradox. We know we are being watched. We are giving example to someone, for good or ill. What they do with that is really beyond our control and beyond what we can even imagine.

That's the message of the second parable—the crazy saying about the mustard seed. Jesus uses that example to remind his followers that God already has a wildly fruitful plan in operation. Just as the smallest of seeds ends up being big enough to provide shade for the birds of the sky, small beginnings that seem like they will not lead to anything substantial can surprise us. We can't leave anything in our power that speaks of the kingdom undone because we never know how God will use it.

In the end, it's a matter of trust. Do we trust that what we are doing today for the sake of the kingdom will be taken up by the God whose kingdom it is and who has promised that it will come, with us or in spite of us.

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1. Farmers in Jesus' day may not have understood the whole process of plant growth. We know more today.
2. But some things have not changed: the vocation to farm still contains that element of recognition—the whole endeavor is really outside the farmer's control.

You still have to trust that the rains will come, that the crop will be there at the end of the growing season.

3. Jesus knew enough about all that—that the farmer had to give himself over to a process beyond his control.

That element lent itself to using farming as the starting point for talking about the kingdom of God, and God's plan to establish it on the earth.

4. When it comes to the kingdom of God there, too, are elements we can identify:
 - Working for peace and justice
 - Attending to the needs of the poor and lowly
 - Making sure all people have what they need to live lives in keeping with their human dignity
 - Preserving the integrity of creation for generations to come

All these things are within our power to affect now, but the kingdom will be that and more

That “more” is something we have to trust God to supply.

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5. In Jesus' own life there was the need to trust.

He knew what he was called to do. He also knew of the opposition it aroused.

It might have made him wonder about whether there would be a harvest.

Perhaps it was this very personal experience that led him to tell this parable. He knew first hand the importance of being patient—the results he hoped for where beyond his control.

6. In the spiritual life, trying to force growth out of grace is as futile as yanking on a plant to make it grow faster.

Jesus conflict with the religious leaders of his day is an example that there's no sure-fire way of creating the kind of atmosphere that's conducive to God's reining. It's out of our hands

7. I was recently elected to our provincial council. Three of the other councilors were all students of mine. They remember things I don't—seeds that were planted that have borne fruit, even without me intending it.

8. A paradox: We are called to sow seeds. What happens then is beyond our control. Sometimes its even beyond what we can imagine.

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9. That's the message of the 2nd parable: God uses the example of the stark contrast between the mustard seed and the plant that develops from it to remind us that God already has a wildly fruitful plan in operation.

Small beginnings that seem like they will not amount to anything can surprise us.

We can't leave anything in our power undone because we never know how God will use it.

10. It's God's firm intention that the kingdom of God be established on the earth. He makes good on his promises, however small the beginning. We're called to trust in that, to keep planting and to keep counting on the harvest.