

Between Spring Time and Harvest

Ezekiel 17:22-2, Mark 4:26-34

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If you are into gardening you will know that there is nothing more satisfying than growing things. It is like taking part in creation itself. Whether it is growing from seeds or growing from 'cuttings' you will remember the thrilling moment when the first little shoot or the first little root appears. As I have never had a greenhouse, in my own gardening I gained some practice in taking cuttings and growing new plants from older ones. If the cutting is right and the soil is right then in certain times of the year you can do this successfully outdoors. Alternatively, you can do it inside by putting a leave or stalk in a glass of water and watch how by growing tiny roots it rejuvenates itself and becomes ready to produce a whole new plant.

In our two Bible readings this morning both of these growing practices are covered – at least metaphorically, and in their picturesque ways they are both revealing something of how God's life unfolds in the world. Although many centuries divide the two and they reflect different historical periods in the life of Israel, there is a common thread uniting them, they both believe that the good that God wills is a living, growing reality. Growth is a sign of life; that's how we know that there is life, because growth occurs. A table or a chair is also part of reality, but they don't 'grow', do they? They remain the same regardless of whether they were made in a humble workshop or by the hands of a most accomplished craftsman. And if growth is the sign of life then that has implications for our life of faith as well. Is our faith a feeding table, a comforting chair, a wisdom-full of bookshelf, all great and worthy items or is it something that is changing, growing all the time?

Hearing the two parables side by side it's not difficult to see that there is some connection between the two. There are those who go so far as saying that when Jesus is talking about the parable of the mustard seed, he is deliberately misquoting Ezekiel's vision and does it perhaps with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Israel, grown from a tender shoot into a mighty cedar tree, planted and tended by the very hand of God on the great mountain offering refuge to birds of every kind, is a majestic, uplifting image. It was given to the downtrodden, suffering Israelites in the depth of their exile in Babylon. It expressed the people's impossible dreams as well as

God's promise of hope. And as the fate of the nation kept repeating itself with disappointing regularity, it is quite likely that Ezekiel's vision was well-known and kept alive to provide hope in successive hopeless situations of the people, such as the one they found themselves in again in Jesus' time.

Jesus' audience then would have been quite happy to hear about mighty trees that grow big with spreading branches giving shade to all sorts of birds. It conveyed to them that Jesus was one of them, shared their traditions and their aspirations. We, Christians, Jesus' current day audience are not averse to a bit of glory talk either. It is well illustrated by the words of some of our most popular hymns. And just the other day I heard on the radio about a well-known tele-evangelist, who is collecting millions of dollars from his followers for an executive jet. He needs this – he says- because he wants to be able to take the Good News to anywhere in the world without refuelling! And he adds with great conviction, if Jesus had the opportunity, he would have done the same. Well, I am no so sure. As far as we know Jesus was travelling on foot on the dusty roads of Galilee and he squarely refused the first-century version of world-wide influence as one of his early temptations.

So here, in his parable, the way Mark brings it to his readers, he is using the popular, prophetic image of Ezekiel plucked from the memories of his people and to their surprise, he 'down-sizes' it to reflect their true situation. Talking about mustard seeds and mustard plants (even the largest of them) is not the same as talking about cedar trees! Sowing seeds in a local field, or someone's garden (as in Matthew's and Luke's version) is not the same as planting cedar cuttings on a 'high and lofty mountain, the highest mountain in Israel'. It is as if Jesus was saying to his audience: 'Get real! Stop harking back to the good old days and stop pinning all your hopes on the return of those days. Look to God's future. That may look quite different, but it will be God's. The point is not the size but the miracle of growth.'

And, in any case, this is not merely about Israel's future, or about the future of the Church, in our case, for that matter. It is about that elusive concept, which Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. Here are then a few simple points we could ponder as we reflect on Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, keeping in mind that it is about our future as it is bound up with God's future, which is what we mean by the Kingdom of God.

Growth is a mysterious process, the seed is scattered, life goes on, 'evening comes and morning comes' (Genesis 1:5) as the first shorter parable asserts; the seed sprouts and grows secretly and we don't know how, we cannot direct it, we cannot control it. As in the case of the seed, God's Kingdom, God's influence in the world also works in that kind of secret way *from the inside out* so for quite a while there may be nothing much to show for it. It is not surprising if we get depressed about the world. There is so much bad news about. Things are changing so rapidly around us, and all for the worse – as someone said the other day. Jesus' parable is a hopeful one; it seems to encourage its hearers to trust the growing process. It is natural and very human to get anxious about ourselves and about those close to us when things get hard. But all the time there is growth, there is new life getting ready to surprise us. It may not come from the outside with overwhelming, un-mistakable glory nevertheless the expansive, quiet gentleness burgeoning out from within, is roomy, inviting and hospitable and it is for the good of the nations and for the planet we inhabit.

The second point was beautifully illustrated to me by a recent experience, still within the area of botany. Some years ago, when I first planted my new garden I was so keen to fill it with all my favourite plants that inevitably some plants got into the wrong places. My lovely white shrub rose looked great in front of a smallish flowering cherry tree, but then the tree grew and grew and blocked out all the sun and for awhile it looked as if the poor rose bush had it. Occasionally a white flower or two appeared here and there on its spindly branches, but I was convinced that nothing would come of it and I was ready to write it off as a failure. What a delight it was when this year, just last week actually, I saw a great bunch of snow white roses appearing at the top of my cherry tree – level with my first floor study window. I could hardly believe my eyes! This rose just didn't give up! It kept growing in the most unfavourable situation, against its very nature (for it wasn't a climbing rose) twisting and turning towards the little bit of light it could find through the heavy foliage of the much bigger tree, until finally it found itself in full sunshine.

The direction of growth matters. Healthy, *life-giving growth happens when it's directed towards the source of life*. The rose bush needed the sunlight for its photosynthesis to keep alive, to keep growing, to achieve its full potential. We too need to make our way towards the source of all blessings, towards the Light, goodness and

love we call God. We are all too aware that this journey may take us through hard or densely shaded places but the impulse of growing is to keep looking for the smallest chink in the shade where the sunlight does come in and to move towards it. It may only be enough to take us to the next chink, but bit by bit it will take us into the warmth and radiance of the full sunshine.

And finally, the planting of both Ezekiel's cedar tree cutting and Jesus' mustard seed bring in a *harvest* and this harvest is *for others' benefit*. They become the home for birds of every kind. They bring together different parts of nature and they illustrate the interconnectedness that is now more and more acknowledged as the dominant condition of our very existence on this planet. On Thursday a Memorial Service was held at Westminster Abbey for Stephen Hawking, the world-famous physicist, who died earlier this year. To mark the occasion, the European Space Agency beamed Prof Hawking's words from a big satellite dish in Spain towards the nearest black hole to Earth. Those words movingly spoke about the great revelation of the space age as something that gave humanity a new perspective on ourselves. Looking at the Earth from space we see ourselves as a whole. We see the unity not the division: One planet one human race. We are here together and we need to live together with tolerance and respect, we must become global citizens.

The growth of the kingdom of God in the world, amongst us and within us is measured by the way we are able to transcend our own ego-centric desires, our religious and even national boundaries. Prof Hawking's last words were: "It can be done". People of faith would say *Amen* to that, for we believe that the very image of God is within us in potential form and nurturing its growth in ourselves and in each other will lead us into God's future, which is also our best future. Let it be so.

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