

When we abide in Christ we flourish

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13) 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

One of my favourite things to do is to walk barefoot on the beach - in all weathers. I particularly like walking barefoot on Long Beach, the beach near the house David and I are building at the coast. And yes, to answer your question, 'the house is coming along, slowly, very slowly. I like walking on our beach soaking in the wonder and beauty of the place, feeling the sand beneath my feet. I walk home, barefoot up the track that runs through the gully with a remnant rainforest pocket and those majestic spotted gums and ancient cycads. I feel the earth and ground under my feet and squish my toes in the leaf litter. I have to walk very slowly. Going slow means I can soak up the energy and atmosphere. I feel so grounded and complete in that place. I feel more at home barefoot in a forest than I do anywhere else and it is also where I feel very close to God.

It is wonderful for me then to read those parts of scripture where creation and the environment shine through and where God almost seems to live in creation. God certainly is the master gardener. It is as if scripture is telling us we and every living thing are planted in God, tended by God and grow through the power of God. Nothing and no-one is beyond the regenerative and recreative power of God. In the passage from Ezekiel the prophet uses the image of the twig of a cedar tree to describe how God will cause even the smallest and insignificant piece of creation, a twig, to flourish and provide fruit and goodness. The prophet of course is talking the tree being Israel and the "high and lofty mountain" it is on is Zion. When he talks about the blessing of the fruit of the tree he means that Israel is to be a blessing to all peoples. The passage tells us categorically that it is God who accomplishes this task.

Trees are mentioned all over the bible! In Genesis, we learn, intriguingly, that God made trees not first because of any utilitarian value, but simply because God likes trees. True, they are "good for food," but before that they are "pleasant to the sight" (Genesis 2:9). The psalms are full of references to trees and the wonder of creation. Psalm 52.8 says that those who trust in the Lord are "like a green olive tree". And the beauty of trees makes them surprisingly erotic image in the Song of Songs (2:3; 7:7-8). This is a book all about the love and passion of God. And then in our gospel reading is that well-known parable about the kingdom of God that begins as a small mustard seed yet grows into the greatest of all shrubs. It too becomes a place of nurture and blessing.

There is a hidden joke in this parable for mustard bushes were actually weeds. They were a 1st century Palestinian farmers nightmare. Jesus is talking about purposely sowing a weed into the garden or field. My mother-in-law is a keen gardener. She tends and loves the garden and is absolutely vigilant about getting rid of weeds. It would be an absolutely shocking thing if she actually went and planted weeds. This parable not only has it's humorous side it is also subversive. The prevailing notion of the time was that one day the nation of Israel would be mighty and strong, like the majestic cedar tree in the Ezekiel passage. It is an image of power, strength and might. Instead Jesus parable is about humble weeds that still cause flourishing. Jesus used the stuff of life and nature to describe God's Kingdom.

In amongst everything else we talk about and do in church we often forget the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus ministry. The Kingdom of God was the subject of Christ's first sermon. The very first thing Jesus says in Marks gospel (Mark 1:14) is "*The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news*". It was the topic that he

focused his teaching on during his last 40 days on earth. Luke writes “*After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God*” (Acts 1:3). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said the kingdom of God was the first thing we should seek and everything else will follow (Mt 6:33). The coming of the Kingdom is the first thing we pray for in the prayer Jesus taught his followers – “*Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your Kingdom come*”. And at the end of Acts we hear that Paul, the great exponent of the Gospel quote “*boldly and without hindrance preached the Kingdom of God*”.

And it is parables and stories of seeds and shrubs, gardens and weeds that Jesus uses to describe his most important teaching.

I heard recently about a group of Christians who seemed to get this whole seed, Kingdom, flourishing, nature and God thing seriously wrong - or at least seriously confused. Apparently they took wheat seeds to Antarctica and planted them to symbolize God's Kingdom. It caused an international uproar because not only did they bring weeds into a pristine natural environment they also broke numerous international treaties.

And theologically they missed the whole point of the parable - it is symbolic. That is we need to be spending our time not planting seeds to point to God's Kingdom but we need to be God's Kingdom. People of peace, reconciliation and justice. A community of real and true flourishing. A people grounded in Reality, in the earth, and open to the Spirit. A people who do things that actually help others and the earth.

So one of the questions I have asked myself is what exactly is the seed that becomes so good, such a place and being of flourishing?

One answer is the actual blood of Christ. By that I mean when Christ died on that cross on Calvary and then subsequently rose three days later God made it possible for all humanity to have a picture and possibility of deep and abiding reconciliation and peace. It became possible to both be part of the Kingdom and embody it. The stark contrast of scapegoating violence with profound love and forgiveness opened our eyes to what the Kingdom of God was really all about. It took some shedding of blood for us to see a new truth. We forget that it took the events of that Easter long ago to see that another way of being in the world was possible. Once we knew it we could then begin to become it. The blood of Christ then is the seed of new knowledge and ultimately the flourishing of the Kingdom. We become a new creation through knowing and experiencing a new truth.

Another answer is to see the seed as the seed of faith, the seed of trust in the power of God's extraordinary love seem most compellingly the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That small seed of faith is planted and then what remains is the patient cultivating and the nurturing. That seed of trust begins to make all the difference in our lives as we surrender to God's love and care, the master gardener of our lives, the one who recreates us. We trust that in all circumstances and situations we are indeed planted in God, tended by God and empowered by God. With God we work out our salvation, our journey of healing and wholeness. This why Paul could proclaim so joyously in the Corinthians reading that "from now on we regard no one from a human point of view because if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

These passages then and so many others tell us that God's power and provision are found in and throughout nature and that creation itself is the thing that can most accurately describe how God's spirit works in the world and in us. Creation reveals God and God's ways. So does scripture. It is

not surprising then that the patristic and medieval theologians believed that the two privileged places for encountering God were in creation and in the bible.

What we do during a Eucharist, a communion service, is we intentionally bring scripture and creation together, Word and Sacrament as one. The fruit of the vine, the work of human hands, wine and bread, are offered and become spiritual food, the body and blood of Christ for us. Both the wine and the bread were once seeds. We share in the sacrament, are fed by the Spirit and are reminded yet again that we are one. One with God, one with creation and one with each other. It is an amazingly profound and beautiful prayer and ritual. It is a prayer that brings us back into relationship with God. We who are fractured and disconnected are reconnected, reconciled to God and each other. Just think for a moment of the richness of the communion? It's symbol and power and what it means for you, how it feeds you and grows within you God's Kingdom?

However, all this is not just about a beautiful picture of God and a nice idea about human community. The picture and the reality is meant to point us to truths we can stake our lives and on and live for. It is meant to pull us into a different way of relating to the world and each other. This encounter we have with God is meant to lead to human flourishing and blessing. We don't just gather round an altar to feel good. We gather round this table to become good, to become goodness through the grace of God. We gather around this table to abide in Christ for when we abide in Christ we flourish.

Let me read for you again those last few lines of our psalm.

- 12 The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree:
they shall spread abroad like a cedar in Lebanon;
13 For they are planted in the house of the Lord:
and flourish in the courts of our God.
14 In old age they shall be full of sap:
they shall be sturdy and laden with branches;
15 And they will say that the Lord is just:
the Lord is my Rock.

Amen!