

## Third Sunday after Pentecost 2021

Ezekiel 17:22-24, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Mark 4:26-34

If you are interested in propagating or indeed gardening generally, the readings from Ezekiel and from the gospel today will resonate. Ezekiel writes of breaking off a piece of cedar tree and replanting it on a high mountain, Mark writes of the parable of the mustard seed which grows into a large tree. I am not a gardener, I have no idea about propagating and seedlings; I was much more interested in the birds that are nesting in these cedars and mustard trees. So much so that I found an old book published in 1916 called 'Birds of the Bible', but it was of little help. Clearly these trees and the birds nesting in them are metaphors to draw Jesus' disciples into his thought world, his imagination. Clearly within their seemingly bucolic simplicity lies significant political and religious overtones. This is not about horticulture or ornithology.

It is often said: 'birds of a feather...' and more often than not this proverb is used rather cynically to describe the gathering of the likeminded, particularly of the more dubious type! The first recorded use of the proverb in English was in 1545: *It is easy to know the cause for as byrdes of one kynde and color flock and flye allwayes together / so the papistes will euer be together.* This was from an anti-Catholic satire "The Rescuing of the Papist Fox" written at the height of the English Reformation. Clearly the birds in this parable are not of this ilk. They are a metaphor for all those for whom the kingdom of heaven - the mustard tree, is home.

This kingdom, our true home, is not a place for xenophobic folk who will only fly with their own kind, this kingdom is a place which is completely new, it does not hold fast to ancient allegiances it transcends national, political and even, dare I say, religious boundaries, as Ezekiel pointed out every kind of bird! It is constantly changing and evolving it is always in the process of growing of being renewed. The problem is that we struggle to see this kingdom; more often than not, this is not the world that we see when look around us. Our passage this morning from Paul is tricky, not helped by the fact that we miss the first part of the chapter. In it he says: *For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.* Paul, ever the tentmaker, uses the idea of the tent as our current situation - cold, wet, miserable and uncomfortable!

It is so very easy for us to lose heart. I believe Jesus found that same discouragement in his disciples, hence the parables we heard this morning. This kingdom that they yearned for, as we do, is likened to a mustard seed. Now very few of us have the mystical leanings of Julian of Norwich, but if we did we would, no doubt would have placed this seed in the palm of our hand and described what we see, or perhaps the potential of what we see. In one of her 'shewings' Julian famously placed a Hazelnut in the palm of her hand: *"And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in*

*the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. This is what the kingdom is 'it is all that is made.'* Within it lies this great hope and potential that is at the heart of Christian faith: that from this will come a kingdom in which all find a home.

Twice today Paul speaks of his confidence. It is in this confidence that he envisions a new creation a new way of being together this new home. He speaks of this creation as things that can be seen, yes; but also things unseen. I rather like the way that he describes those of waiting on God as being beside ourselves, just a little crazy, but we must also be seen to be of a sound mind if we are to be able to engage in this preparing the ground for the kingdom in this world. This preparation comes with a complete engagement in the world *and* in our lives of faith, we can't, and mustn't separate the two. It is by holding these competing ideas together that we will glimpse the kingdom. Our lives of faith may seem to have little or no impact on the overwhelming power of the market, or politics or society generally but that is to downplay the impact that even the smallest idea can have in making way for the kingdom.

Why then are we cold, wet and miserable? Why are we not confident? What is it then that lies at the heart of our discouragement? The fact is we will not see the tree, we will simply see the seed, if that. Our discouragement lies in the folly of ever believing that it's possible to arrive, to be able to say 'we've made it.' Congregations yearn for something, as we all do, perhaps they want to increase numbers, improve the church buildings, balance the books, get a decent Rector, introduce contemporary music! We yearn for that tree to grow and for us to roost in its branches. But Jesus tells us that the Kingdom can be likened only to a mustard seed, in our time. Of course we work towards growing this seed, but it often grows out of sight in ways that we often cannot envisage, ultimately it is something growing within us. As St Paul wrote in another place to the same Corinthians: 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.'

In what seems a contradiction the journey is our 'place,' we are a pilgrim people, and if we are we will engage with the world around us – with sound minds, but also be prepared to take the risk of faith – which some might say is mad! If we are prepared to journey and grow we will engage with the world around us without identifying too strongly with it and our faith will be constantly nurtured and renewed. It is the journey that nourishes and grows the seed within, it is the journey that makes folk want to join in.

'Journey's end in lovers meeting, every wise man's son doth know.' So wrote Shakespeare..... Birds of a Feather! Love birds perhaps! Amen.