

The kingdom keeps growing

We enter the green season of the church year – the Sundays after Pentecost – the Sundays of growth – as the plants grow in the sunshine, so we as Christians grow in the light of Jesus' empty tomb because for us, the Son has also risen. The first half of the church year – Advent to the festival of Pentecost – turns our attention to Jesus – his coming into the world (and his eventual return – his second coming for all to see) – his birth – his epiphany as the Son of God announced paradoxically at his baptism when he looks like a wet repentant sinner – his teaching and miracles culminating in our awareness that God's gifts aren't the presents, the new words, or the apparent magic Jesus brings but he himself – and so we see his passion, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection and ascension. It is good that half of the church year sends us back to the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2), to return to the corner stone of the church (Eph 2:20) so that we might continue to grow and be built as God's living stones (1 Peter 2:5) into his temple (2 Cor 6:16) according to his plan and will.

We recently put some trestles in the back yard for the to grow. I've been really surprised at how quickly they have grown this year as they've climbed the frame. Left to themselves on the ground they didn't grow nearly as well but supported on the trellis they have grown magnificently. We continue to grow on the trellis of God's Word. From now until Advent we will hear mostly the gospel of Mark – with a few Sundays picking up John and Matthew. 2nd Corinthians, Ephesians, James, and Hebrews give our New Testament witness to Jesus. The Old Testament pointers to Jesus are from almost a different book every Sunday and in one sense reflect the truth that if you search them you will find Jesus but in another sense suggest to me that even after nearly 2000 years the followers of Jesus – including the lectionary compilers – are just not sure what to do with the Old Testament!

Lectionary compilers usually select the Old Testament reading after having selected the Gospel. It's like choosing the main course for the meal then building a dinner around it with the selection of entrée, soup, dessert, wine – some of which while served before the main meal are chosen because of it. The first reading is like a row of spot lights on one side of a stage which

come on and reveal one side of the person centre stage. The second reading brings up light on the other side of the person. The Gospel brings the full range of lights on centre stage – and the person is now clearly and completely seen. The Old Testament points to Jesus – written before Jesus walked on earth – it nevertheless reveals God's dealing with his people in their time and place but also within it are the seeds of the message of God's final and complete action towards people – the sending of his Son, whom we know to be the carpenter from Nazareth, Jesus. Apart from the Gospel accounts, the New Testament points back to Jesus and explains life with Jesus who, though he died, is alive forever more. The Gospel accounts, of course, most clearly present Jesus – hence, for example, our standing just as the Gospel is about to be read as the King has entered the room so to speak.

Today our Gospel presents two of Jesus' parables – the growing seed and the mustard seed as pictures of the kingdom of God. This imagery is not unique to Jesus. God directed Ezekiel to pose a parable to the people of Israel of his day – the exiles – to those taken away from their home as a consequence of Israel's failed political gamesmanship between the Babylonians and the Egyptians – about 2 eagles and a vine. One great eagle had broken the top most twigs of the cedar tree but nurtured it in soil from its home but in a foreign city and cared for it so that it grew – not a tall tree but a low lush vine. And then another eagle came along and the vine pushed its branches towards the new eagle for sustenance and support. What's it about? Well, you don't have to wait because God gave the answer.

The Israel we're talking about is hundreds of years after its golden age – the days of King David ending with King Solomon – after which the kingdom was split in two and gradually reduced in significance and importance in the geo-political scene. After major destruction at the hands of the Assyrians, Israel became this little buffer state between Babylon and Egypt and never seemed to play its cards right with any political savvy. This political fog and confusion reflected the religious swamp of chasing after fads – religious ones included – and so God sent the prophets again and again to call his people back to him. Ezekiel and his peers are the displaced persons that occur when politics goes

bad – for Israel had a ‘favoured nation status’ with Babylon – ok, it didn’t have much choice about that – but it was supposed to be faithful to its word and trust God – instead Israel tried to swap allegiances and link up with Egypt. After the first wave of exiles were taken – think Daniel and his contemporaries – Jeremiah warned Jerusalem not to do keep on this path but he was ignored and Babylon brought its troops in and more exiles were taken – among them Ezekiel – and Israel still didn’t learn – and then finally the troops came back and destroyed Jerusalem – temple included.

The parable of the eagles and the vine is a picture of their current situation – why the people are displaced – why they are powerless – why their future looks bleak – it is their own fault for not listening to God and for being unfaithful in terms of their trust in God and overly confident in their own political skill.

Of course knowing a situation – accurately, clearly, truthfully – doesn’t overly help if the situation is a painful mess. Often the suffering is intensified with knowing – hence many people don’t want to hear the details of bad news. Knowledge isn’t, of itself, help. The people in exile are that – exiled – and they have no power to change their status. And so God keeps speaking and firstly he promises that he will destroy Israel’s oppressors and then he says ...

²² [Thus says the Lord God:] “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.” (Ezekiel 17:22-24 ESV)

God doesn’t give the detail but he gives the promise that he will plant the twig, the remnant, onto his holy mountain – that heavenly Jerusalem – and it will grow tall again – not a low vine but a tall tree rich with branches and fruit so lush that birds of every kind will find shade and shelter. And all the other kingdoms of the world – the

other trees – will know that the Lord has done this and in the interim God will continue to act – dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

Does this mean anything for us today? Well, we know that the exiles eventually returned but it wasn’t until the last century – in 1948 – that Israel actually achieved some manner of political independence – and whether that has any significance today is hotly debated. We also know that throughout history and also today people seek to establish God’s kingdom on earth in all sorts of ways so that idea at least hasn’t vanished.

As followers of Jesus knowing that as we search the Scriptures we will find him, we look to meet Jesus in the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s words. Earlier God had promised through Isaiah that a shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse – a righteous branch – and peace – the lion will lie down with the lamb – on God’s holy mountain (Isaiah 11). Jesus said that when he was lifted up that he would draw all people to himself (John 12:32). Cursed is he who hangs on the tree but in doing so he who was cut off – who died and was raised to life – has become the means by which people become the righteousness of God who now go and bear fruit that will last. We know that Jesus did not establish a political kingdom – he went to the temple not the garrison on Palm Sunday – but rather his kingdom exists within all earthly realms for his kingdom though real and active and even feared by this world is not of this world but is anchored in him and where he is there is his kingdom – in his followers – manifest visibly through his words and also when attached to water, bread and wine.

Under the shadow of the cross the proud – like the Pharisee in the temple – are brought low and those cringing on the floor – like the repentant publican – are lifted up. This kingdom doesn’t look overly worldly and polished – while it is a most noble cedar it looks like a mustard plant – just as the cross scandalises and confuses the wise and powerful – so Jesus fulfils Ezekiel’s words himself.

Welcome to the green season – time of growth – God is active in the world – active in and with us – as the Holy Spirit brings us into the kingdom of God through joining us with the Son who sets us free – not to rule this world but to serve it.