

Readings for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

16th June 2024

First Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender shoot from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree; I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10,14-17

Brothers and sisters, we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

The love of Christ urges us on because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Gospel: St Mark 4:26-34

Such a large crowd gathered around Jesus that he got into a boat and began to teach them using many parables. Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

Jesus also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

from Rev'd David Higgon

Mustard Seeds

Jesus spent a lot of his time teaching people about the kingdom of God through storytelling that used everyday things and everyday experiences as metaphors to help those listening to understand something of both the mystery and of the majesty of God's kingdom. Today's reading centres on the humble mustard seed and the mustard plant, which is common throughout the Mediterranean and would have been an abundant spice even for the poor.

When I was growing up in post war South Wales in the 1950's, the only spices in our larder were a small pot of white pepper and a tin of Coleman's mustard powder. There were no curry powders, yet alone three different types of paprika, cayenne pepper, cumin and coriander seed and powder, cardamom, turmeric or garam masala or the numerous other spice blends that litter my kitchen cupboard today, just white pepper and Colman's mustard in its bright yellow tin. I didn't realise it at the time, but mustard is the only spice that grows naturally in this country and would have been the most common spice accessible to most people. So, I grew up with the fiery eye watering taste of Coleman's mustard, which became an essential accompaniment to a ham or cold beef sandwich or a slice of pork pie.

Jesus uses the mustard seed as a symbol of how something small and insignificant can grow into something much bigger, he also uses the mustard plant as a metaphor for something that provides nourishment and shelter, in the way the mustard plant is attractive to birds as a plant for food and shelter. His choice of a mustard seed as a metaphor is interesting because in truth it is neither the smallest of seeds nor does it grow into anything more than a large bush, but presumably his audience understood the seed as a symbol of large growth from small beginnings, and of the need for places of safety, nourishment and of restoration.

We all at times need to find such places where we can rest a while from the clamour of the world around us. I am privileged to having mighty oaks, ash and birch trees that shade my garden and that provide a refuge for all sorts of wild birds and red squirrels. We can easily overlook the importance of trees in our lives, to overlook their benefits to the wider ecosystem and to wildlife, and their benefit to our own physical and spiritual wellbeing. Trees provide shade to sit and rest and to reflect on the nature that surrounds us and to think about what is really important in life, and it is not surprising that trees feature prominently in the bible.

There are important trees found at the beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, where it says that out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to sight and good for food. Also, in Genesis we have the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil and the tree of life. Then in the last book of the bible, in the book of Revelation, we have again the tree of life, with its twelve types of fruit every month and its leaves for the healing of the nations.

We have the mighty oaks of Mamre at Hebron, where Abraham pitched his tent, the cedars of Lebanon used in the building of the temple by Soloman and there are numerous references to olive trees and fig trees. Indeed, in the old testament, comparing the Kingdom of God to a tree is fairly common, for example in the book of the prophet

Ezekiel, the cedar tree is the tree that God plants on the mountain height of Israel that provides fruit and under which every bird may live and where in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

Presumably, Jesus was familiar with the book of the prophet Ezekiel so why does he compare the Kingdom of God to a lowly mustard seed and not a mighty cedar? I wonder if Jesus in this story of the mustard seed is talking about himself. Does he see his birth, life and ministry as a small seed planted in the ground, a seed that then grows into the tree, the tree on which he is crucified and dies and where paradoxically, we under the shade of its cross, find nourishment, refuge and hope. The cross of Christ is a profound sign that God enters into the darkness of suffering, death and near despair, and the cross reminds us that Christ didn't die into nothingness but into the embrace of God who gives life.

So, finding a place to rest a while is important for our wellbeing. Now I must confess there are times when I am tempted to turn my back on the world, and to retreat into my own place of refuge and peace, and I feel this even more so after weeks of being surrounded by the clamour and often the nonsense of the general election and the media circus; but tempting as this is, it is important that we remain engaged with the world.

I have a favourite prayer from the Iona community:

Christ you are within each one of us.

Nearer are you than breathing,

Closer than hands and feet.

Ours are eyes with which you, in the mystery, look out with compassion into the world.

Take us outside, O Christ, outside holiness,

Out to where soldiers curse and nations clash at the crossroads of the world.

Now I must make myself clear that I have no intention now or at any time to tell you how to vote or who to vote for – that would be an abuse of the authority of the church, and it would be a difficult thing for me to do because I haven't quite made up my own mind as to who to vote for. What I would urge you to do is to engage in the election process and to think and pray about how you will cast your vote. There are many vital and important issues that need to be considered when we cast our votes, especially the needs of the most poor and vulnerable in our society, and the vital question of who will care for God's creation best.

Deciding who will care for God's creation best is proving to be a difficult question to answer and it takes a lot of sifting through the flotsam and jetsam of party election politics. The one thing I am certain about from what I have heard or read is that for whoever wins the election, that none of the policies likely to be implemented will amount to anything near to a sufficient response to our global situation.

So, I continue to sift through the electioneering detritus to find any promising mustard seeds of hope for our planet and for the whole of God's creation, or to identify politicians who are at least open and responsive to the concerns for God's creation, and who are willing to engage with the issues and to work with others, for what I consider to be an issue beyond party and national politics.

The only thing that I can ask of you is that you find time to sit under the shade of your tree, in whatever form that takes, and to reflect on your relationship with God and his good and wonderful creation, and to ask yourself what is important in your life, and then to decide who you are going to vote for.

