

Proper 6 Year B 2021

It doesn't work like that, does it? If you cut off a sprig from a cedar tree and push it into the ground, it will die. And even if it should, by some miracle, live, it wouldn't bear much fruit. So what we have here from the reading from Ezekiel is an allegory or a riddle to ponder. Ezekiel himself says that these words are a riddle. From the topmost branch of the cedar - which represents here the dynastic house of King David - God will take a tender shoot and plant it on Mount Zion - in the heart of Jerusalem. This would ring bells to those familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. 'A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse (the father of David), and a branch shall grow out of his roots.' We read this prophecy from Isaiah each Christmas. The twig which God will plant will grow into a majestic tree which will give shade, that is comfort, for every kind of bird - and 'all the birds of the air' was a Jewish euphemism for all the nations of the world. So this

new beginning for the House of David will bring shelter and comfort for all people, and they will know the wonder of God's work and his glory, as he speaks his word, to bring about what he desires. 'The high trees shall be made low and the low high'. Does that remind you of something else? 'He has cast down the mighty from their seats and exalted the humble and meek'. We seldom have public services of evensong these days but I am sure most of you will remember the Magnificat from years ago.

So this brief prophecy, just three verses long, shows us God's cosmic powers, the scale of what he intends to do. What a wonderful message, delivered via Ezekiel, to the Israelites in exile and captivity in Babylon.

Similarly, the parables we heard from Mark's Gospel need a little bit of work - not to be taken as agricultural stories at face value. Jesus talks in parables precisely because parables are demanding, challenging - and talk of the things of God is meant to challenge people. That is why any

reading of God's word requires prayer and reflection and study if we are, in the end, to hear God's word, not our own.

Just as the prophecy of Ezekiel reminds us of that of Isaiah, so Jesus' words about the birds of the air remind us of that of Ezekiel and again we have an agricultural nonsense - a mustard seed growing into a huge shrub. It doesn't happen like that. This parable, which we find only in St Mark's Gospel, has another echo - this time from Isaiah. Jesus says 'With what can we compare the Kingdom of God and what parable shall we use for it?' Isaiah says 'To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?' and he goes on to describe God as the creator of the earth and its people, controlling their history.

This passage (the mustard seed parable) is about a fresh vision of God coming to rescue his people, coming to restore Israel after her time of devastation. Israel must not think that God is incapable to act, powerless, on a level

with pagan idols that promise much and do little. (We are back to Isaiah). No one should look at Jesus, surrounded by local, unimportant people, and say 'How can this possibly be the beginning of the kingdom of God?' In the histories of the time, Jesus hardly gets a mention! That is how important he was.

You can imagine people laughing at this description of the kingdom - mustard grows wild all over the countryside, weak and straggly - and Jesus says it will grow into a huge shrub, for all the birds of the air. Mark's Gospel begins with stories of huge crowds gathering to hear Jesus (nine times in the first three chapters); there are miracles of healing and of acceptance of the least respected of people in a very hierarchical society - and now Mark says it is time to explain what is going on - to explain; the kingdom of God has come near. And it will grow in ways which are beyond human understanding and certainly beyond human control. The seed has been sown. The harvest will

eventually come - in God's good time, and through things which seem laughable or impossible. Jesus is painting vivid pictures which will stick in the minds of people - then they will have to work out what he means. Our imagination is challenged. Are we open to an unexpected harvest when God gives growth? Do we 'shout for joy because of the works of his hands' as it says in the psalm?

'Don't worry' Jesus is saying, 'remember who your God is and what he has promised. Realize that this small beginning is a start of God's intended kingdom - the kingdom that will eventually offer shade to the whole earth'. His call is addressed to us all. It consists of sowing small seeds of a new humanity. Jesus does not speak of big things, impossible things. The kingdom is very humble and modest in its origins, something which can go as unnoticed as the smallest seed, but it has the potential to grow and bear fruit in most unexpected ways. So what seeds are you sowing here? As we have seen the most common everyday

things can give growth to the kingdom. A kind word, a telephone call, a friendly smile, an up-to-date web site - seeds we sow. I was in a supermarket car park when a very obese lady in front of me lost something from her trolley, and I bent down and picked it up and handed it back. Such a small thing - and yet she was so grateful - it would have been difficult for her. It seems nothing, and yet it is kingdom building. When it happens to you - pass it on.

Perhaps we need to learn to appreciate little things and small gestures. We are not called to be heroes or martyrs, but we are called to put a little dignity, a little light, a little love, into each corner of our own worlds. Our little seeds of the kingdom, which everyone of us can sow, in a world which seems increasingly violent, sad, frightened, can bring the joy of things small and beautiful into people's lives - and who knows what those things will grow into. Perhaps even something big enough to provide shelter for all the birds of the air, not just birds of a feather.

