

Sermon - God gives the growth

Based on the readings: Ezekiel 17.22–24; Psalm 92.1–4, 12–15; 2 Corinthians 5.6–10, 14–17;
Mark 4.26–34

Parables of growth

- Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings provide us with parables about growth.
- In these parables we are reassured about one of the fundamental aspects of our Lord God - that God is the source of all vitality, all that is life-giving, life-enhancing, life-sustaining.
- So the poets who composed the psalms regularly referred to the growth of trees to express this fundamental blessing of our Lord God.
- From Psalm 92 set for today:
*The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree:
they shall spread abroad like a cedar in Lebanon;
For they are planted in the house of the Lord:
and flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they shall be full of sap:
they shall be sturdy and laden with branches (Psalm 92.12-14)*
- Jesus himself compares the kingdom of God to someone growing a field of grain, and again to a mustard seed growing into a large shrub and providing shelter for a whole community of wildlife.
- The emphasis is repeatedly on growth - dependent on God.

Which mustard plant?

- Before we continue, I want to provide a brief explanation about the mustard seed - about which plant this most likely refers to.
- We tend to think of mustard in terms of the condiment that we might add as a sharp or tangy flavouring to meat - usually just before eating it.
- You're also probably familiar with the mustard seeds used for this - little black, brown or cream-coloured spheres, used for pickling and other recipes where spices are needed.
- These mustard plants certainly do not become shrubs - they are herby annuals that usually die back after seeding.
- The mustard plant that Jesus probably referred to might be *Salvadora persica*, which grows into a large shrub or very bushy small tree, up to seven metres high.
- Such trees are certainly very attractive to small birds, who can safely throng inside one.

What of the old tree?

- Now, while we are given the reassurance of growth in these parables, there is another aspect which makes most people quite uncomfortable.
- In Ezekiel, there is a wonderful image of the Lord God breaking off the growing top of a cedar tree, and planting it in a divinely allocated space, where:
*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. (Ezekiel 17.23)*
- Maybe Jesus was thinking about this exact Scripture when he told his mustard seed parable.
- The obvious focus here is once again about growth.

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- However, there is an unhappy truth here as well.
- What happens to the rest of the original tree?
- Is it not in the right place?
- Does it continue with its own growth?
- Today's passage from Ezekiel ends with the following words:
 - 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. (Ezekiel 17.24)*
- So what has happened to the original tree?
- While that's not described here, in other passages of Scripture we are given the understanding that the Lord moves on from things that are no longer growing, or that are not growing in the right way, or in the right place.
- In this there is a strong message for God's people - including us - over and over again throughout history.
- What was growing, what was growing *well*, what was growing *in the most beneficial way*, can change.
- Church communities, even though established through the work of the Holy Spirit, can become vulnerable:
 - vulnerable to not growing in ways that are beneficial to themselves or to others;
 - vulnerable to producing only unproductive suckers, or diseased or deformed growth;
 - vulnerable to not growing at all, but merely surviving, while year after year more and more branches die back, so that the tree becomes mostly a skeleton, with maybe one last remaining branch, low down, close to the trunk, bravely putting on a small show of fresh green each year.
- I've known such tired, old communities, desperately trying to survive.
- They don't have the energy or resources to grow - they don't have the energy or resources even to celebrate the little life they have.
- They are focused on surviving, grimly hanging in there and waiting for something to rescue them - as long as they don't have to change, as long as they can hold onto their old identity.

And where is God in this?

- Where is God in such unhappy, life-sapping situations?
- We need to look back at the start of the passage from Ezekiel:
 - I myself will take a sprig*
 - from the lofty top of a cedar ...*
 - On the mountain height of Israel*
 - I will plant it,*
 - in order that it may ... become a noble cedar ...*
 - All the trees of the field shall know*
 - that I am the Lord. (Ezekiel 17.22-24)*
- God is where the growth is.
- Look for what is growing, and there you'll find God's Spirit at work.

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- How does Jesus describe the kingdom of God?
'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground ... and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.' (Mark 4.26–27)
- And again:
'With what can we compare the kingdom of God ...? It is like a mustard seed, which, when ... it is sown it grows up.' (Mark 4.30–32)
- Jesus tells us that where we see beneficial growth, we are witnessing God's kingdom being made manifest.
- This does not mean that there is no die-back at all.
- Just as Jesus, the prophets and psalmists of the Bible refer frequently to the metaphors evident in God's creation, so we should note that plants and trees produce leaves that live for a time, and then die and fall off.
- Shrubs and trees invariably produce many buds of growth, some of which die while others grow further.
- As Psalm 92 says, so long as even
*In old age they [are] full of sap:
they shall be sturdy and laden with branches (Psalm 92.14)*
- So it's not about focusing on where things are dying back, but rather focusing on where things are growing.
- Either in old branches where there is still abundant life and energy, or in new branches - even in those that might still be young and tender.

Where is the growth at St John's?

- During these last few weeks we have once again endured the lockdown from the regime of pandemic regulations, there has been an opportunity to pause and reflect a bit on where the growth currently is in our own faith community at St John's.
- It has been tempting to focus on the aspects where leaves and even branches appear to be dying back, and to lament how certain activities and ways of functioning as a worshipping community seem to be drying up.
- It can be tempting to find a comfortable chair, wrap oneself in a familiar rug, sit near the heater, and mutter about how things are not what they used to be.
- I hope you understand that I'm not only talking literally, but also metaphorically.
- But in this temptation to close our eyes and hearts to what God might be doing, let's be encouraged by the words of Ezekiel, and Jesus, to look at where the growth can currently be found at St John's.
- The team of parishioners assisting at the Tuesday evening community meals has grown, and is stepping up to being rostered monthly.
- And the guests there are always very appreciative of the meals we offer.
- The mere fact that we have both The Dining Room Mission and the Wednesday evening meals back here again is evidence of an old branch full of sap, putting out fresh growth.
- The community service groups like AA that meet here each week ensure that on every day of the week people are being encourage and supported - being blessed - in this building.
- And since the beginning of this year, the number of these groups meeting here has grown to eight.

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- This year our Kindergarten is growing in strength, in resilience, and in the improvement of its management structures.
- There are still some challenges that are taking hard work to address right now, but the growth is also evident.
- There is a revitalised play area, a food pantry has been established for those doing it tough, and the Open Day a few weeks back had a record number of visitors, with next year's registrations looking the best in a long time.
- And our Mission Action Team has been growing the relationship between Kindergarten and Parish once again: while plenty of further growth is needed, the sap is nevertheless flowing and the buds are sprouting.

- There are other areas in our parish life where new growth is needed, but I'm aware of unseen roots finding new sources of nourishment, and new buds forming beneath the bark, preparing to push out and be visible.

Dependent on our faith relationship

- Let us finally be reminded and encouraged by the words of Paul to the Corinthian church.
- He writes:
So we are always confident ... for we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5.6-7)
- Sometimes, when we might be struggling to see where God as it work in situations that we find difficult to bear or engage with, we can always turn to Paul's stories as he struggled through all kinds of persecutions and natural disasters, and read the words of encouragement in his letters.
- When he writes '*for we walk by faith, not by sight*', he reminds us to depend on our faith relationship with God.
- Paul continues in this passage:
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5.17)
- He taps into what Ezekiel was saying about a new tree, grown from the old.
- Paul connects us with the new growth that Jesus wants us to see and celebrate.
- And Jesus and Ezekiel remind us that it is God who accomplishes the growth -
- our Lord God, who is indeed the source of life, and all that is life-giving, life-nurturing, and life-sustaining.

May the Lord of Life be with you.