

“Palms, Cedars, and Mustard Plants” – Mark 4:26-34

What a fascinating collage of images we have in our readings this morning. As I looked at them way back on Tuesday, I was struck by some common threads which no doubt accounted for the readings to be gathered together in the Lectionary on this Sunday. One of the key threads is that of trees, and led to my choice for a title. However, as the week progressed the theme has kind of drifted in a different direction. Let's let it unfold and see where it took me.

In the beginning ... well, at least in the Psalm we have palms and cedars, and interesting combination. Interesting because these two trees thrive in different climates; palms are ok with drier settings, although they do still need water – the images that come to mind are of date palms in oases in the desert. On the other hand, cedars need a much moister climate, which is why they grow well here and on the mountain sides in Lebanon. The curious joining of these two trees together in one voice in the Psalm gives a hint at the historical nature of Israel's faith ... with origins as desert travelers now settled on the coast of the Mediterranean, enjoying the lushness of both. The specific reference to old age reinforces the picture of an ages-old faith in a God who has provided this lushness, enabling the people – like a date palm – produce hearty fruit.

And then in Ezekiel we hear of a mighty cedar tree, continuing the theme of a settled people. The use of the cedar here seems somewhat symbolic, referring to God's promise of creating either a great ruler, or a great nation, or both. Whether real or symbolic, there is no mistaking the lush benefits to be promised, with even an explicit reference to the cool shade of the cedar in which the birds can rest. I think many or most of us can relate to that relief, as gathering under a huge cedar on a hot day does indeed provide a cooling and refreshing and invigorating relief.

I like to think that Jesus was thinking of that tree in Ezekiel when he described the mighty mustard bush as being able to fulfill the same restorative function for birds of the air, and signaling that the kingdom of God can provide the same safety and restoration for us as well.

Another common thread that runs through these readings is that it is the power of God at work that is evident across all three settings. Whether being the agent of creation and life in all realms and environments as in the Psalm, or an agent of political and social growth as in Ezekiel, or as the driving force of faith and reconciliation in Mark's gospel, the powerful interest and involvement of God not only in creation but in the lives of people who respond is proclaimed in all three readings. In each and all of these expressions of faith God is proclaimed as the driving force behind growth, and maturity, and the fruition of all good things.

By the time Mark penned his account of the ministry of Jesus, the new fledgling church was growing nervous. Frustration at how long it was taking for the kingdom to appear and the slow, often-chaotic development of the early church was beginning to affect and afflict those early Christians, and the gospel authors sought to address those frustrations and fears by reminding the faithful of what Jesus had said. Mark pairs his unique parable of the mystery of growth with the more common one of the mustard seed to speak a word of encouragement to a church wondering how on earth such a tiny collection of people could ever grow into anything like the promised kingdom. Hunted, persecuted, meeting furtively in homes and caves, there must have been many times they despaired that their movement would fizzle out, that in a generation or two it would have all disappeared, no more than a forgotten memory.

To the small band of close disciples, Jesus spoke these parables of encouragement. To the struggling and tiny early church, Mark echoed these parables of encouragement from Jesus. And the scriptures still speak these same words of encouragement in these parables to the church today.

The first parable reminds us that the growth is from God, totally apart from human effort (“the sower sleeps and rises”) and beyond human understanding (“he does not know how”). The outcome of the seed is determined in part by its DNA, coupled with the nurturing environment of soil, sunshine and rain. Notwithstanding genetic engineering and the resulting ‘franken-food’, efforts to coerce and force growth tend to be futile – we can help by tilling the soil, adding nourishment, and protecting from weeds, but the growth is still God-given. The kingdom of God is not the kingdom of human effort, nor the kingdom of human striving, nor the kingdom of human accomplishment – it is the kingdom of God. We have our roles to play, and we are called to fulfill them, but the accomplishment is still God’s.

And to those who despair over their smallness, their seeming insignificance, who are concerned, frustrated or even depressed by small beginnings, the second parable offers a message to take heart. The vision of the “greatest of shrubs” inspires our efforts, realizing that with God’s intention even the tiniest of beginnings can blossom into a spectacular part of the kingdom of God.

Not that this second parable is free from confusing images just like the first. For example, the mustard shrub is an insidious weed in a canola field. And using the word ‘tree’ to describe this particular piece of flora doesn’t quite fit the images raised by the word ‘tree’ to someone who lives on the Wet – er, West Coast. The tree named in the parable is not your lofty, towering, magnificent Douglas Fir reaching like a hand stretched toward heaven. The mustard plant is more like a scraggly bush, kind of like a mutant rhododendron bush, but nowhere near so pretty. Next to the mustard shrub even a black spruce on the tundra looks good!

But when you stop for a moment to reflect, isn’t the mustard shrub a wonderful metaphor for the kingdom, or at least for the church? Roots firmly anchored, defying anyone to wrest the tree from the ground or from history. You can’t pull this thing out with a tractor and chain! One short, thick, and gnarled trunk soon divides into a number of twisted – almost chaotic – branches, first heading this way, then that way, then suddenly reversing course and dividing again. There’s a randomness and yet a purposefulness about it that is truly reflected in the church as it has developed over two millennia. All of it not necessarily pretty, but providing protection and cool restorative shade for those who rely upon it, and providing spice for the world at large.

And that’s where another common thread through the readings came clear to me, and linked these three readings with another. That implicit thread is the thread of faith, of believing and trusting that God has been, is still, and will continue to be the agent of growth not just in nature but in the church. The additional reading is of course Jesus’ reference to faith like a mustard seed, and such feeble faith being able to move trees and even mountains.

That particular thread came even clearer as the Redevelopment Team left the architect’s offices on Wednesday after yet one more meeting, and even more so as we headed into the weekend. The path to pulling together our new building seems to be as twisted and gnarled as any mustard bush, and yet all four of us on the team confess to each other that our faith has been and continues to be deepened and solidified through the process. You would assume, I hope, that the four of us began this process as people of faith, and you would be right. But all of us agree that we have faced moments when the task seemed so large, so impossible, so unlikely, so improbable that we could only say, “God, if it is to be, then it will have to be you who makes it so!” I know that all four of us have prayed that prayer in the wee hours of a sleepless night. I also know that all four of us will attest to recognizing God’s responses to those prayers, as each obstacle that has arisen has evaporated. People whom we might expect to be negative have been most helpful. Events that could prove to be a source of delay have instead proven to be an aid to

early consideration. Even the ‘experts’ in these fields are shaking their heads, wondering how a project that is so unique could come together so quickly. But I think even they are beginning to understand the message in our readings, for we have received comments such as, “you people are different – you act as if you believe God is right here with us and active in this project.” While we wouldn’t respond directly to them in this way, our collective answer is, to paraphrase Homer Simpson, “doh!” Of course we act that way because we do firmly and completely believe that God is right here with us and active in this challenging and exciting project, helping us to move the church forward into a new context. By times we on the team are terrified, but we have faith that God having brought us so far, will not let it all fall flat so that our enemies can mock us, but will continue to guide us through to completion, and to an outcome that will enable us to glorify God through service to our community in Christ’s name.

Hear then the messages of grace in these readings and parables. Hear that the church is not so unlike the picture of the kingdom offered by the mustard shrub, not necessarily linear or pretty, but nevertheless strongly rooted in God and offering solace in the cool shade for those who need to take refuge. Hear that the growth is due to God’s nurturing love, and that we can anticipate being gathered into his powerful arms. And hear the promise that with God’s nurturing strength the tiniest of visions can indeed turn into the most powerful of ministries offered in Christ’s name. Hear the grace of God proclaimed by Christ, our Lord.