

### **“Randomness and Purpose” – Mark 4:26-34**

The General Assembly was held here in Vancouver this year, and the theme, “The Kingdom is like ...” is echoed in our gospel reading for today. Like the varied collection of commissioners who made up the Assembly we also have a fascinating collage of images in our readings this morning. Some common threads do link the lectionary readings together even though there is a wide and interesting range of flora and vegetation referenced. Let’s see if we can draw some purpose out of the apparent randomness.

In the beginning ... well, at least in the Psalm, we have palms and cedars, an interesting combination. Interesting because these two trees thrive in significantly 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 ... having origins as desert travelers but 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 – to produce hearty fruit.

And then from 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 cedar tree in Ezekiel when he described the mighty mustard bush as being able to fulfill the same restorative function for birds of the air, providing them with safety and sanctuary and signaling that the kingdom of God can provide the same safety and restoration for us as well.

But there’s more ... in addition to images of trees and bushes 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. All of these expressions of faith proclaim God as the driving force behind growth, and maturity, and the fruition of all good things.

Recall that 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. With his favourite technique of a “story within a story” 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, having become 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. We can help that outcome 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 a blessing from God.

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. This lowly shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home: Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, introvert and extrovert. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough.

Not that this second parable is free from confusing images. For example, the mustard shrub is an insidious weed in a canola field, hardly an image we would easily associate with the kingdom of God. Moreover, 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 West Coast. The mustard ‘tree’ named in the parable is not your lofty, towering, and magnificent Douglas Fir reaching like a hand stretched toward heaven. The plant featured here 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 stop for a moment and reflect; isn’t the mustard shrub still 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 is randomness and yet a purposefulness about it that is truly reflected in the church as it has developed over two millennia. The mustard ‘tree’ is not necessarily pretty but does nevertheless provide protection and cool restorative shade for those who rely upon it, and provides enlivening spice for the world at large, attributes that can be ascribed to the church when it is at its best.

Another common thread through the readings shows up as well, and links these three readings with another familiar parable. 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 was reinforced once again as the Redevelopment Team gets drawn into the grunt work of reviewing all of the detailed specifications for the finishing on the new

building – almost 2,000 of such details! Even with the anti-climactic approval by City Council of the bylaw enacting our rezoning propelling us past a critical point, 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 pray, “O God, what have we gotten ourselves into?!” 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 been overcome. 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. By the grace of God our faith has grown and the tiny seed of an idea is blossoming into a wonderful new facility with which we can continue to glorify God through service to our community in Christ’s name.

I invite you to hear and be uplifted by the messages of grace in these readings and parables. Hear that the church is like 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 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 that growth is due to God’s nurturing love and that there is purpose in the randomness and that we will find refuge in his all-encompassing arms.