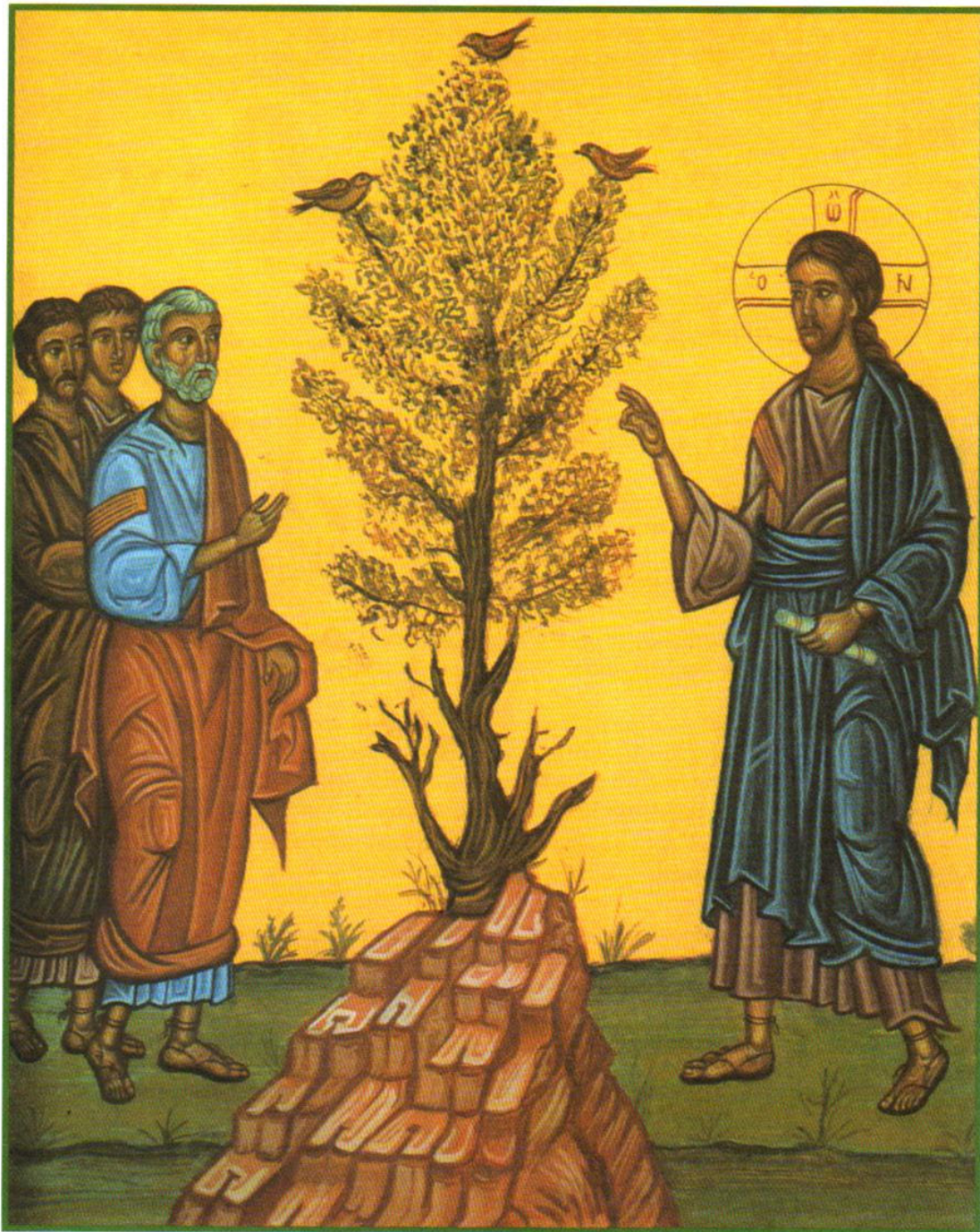


SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 13 June 2021 | The Second Sunday after Trinity

TODAY'S READINGS

Ezekiel 17.22-24 | Psalm 92 | 2 Corinthians 5.6-17 | Mark 4.26-34



✚ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Earlier this week the Forestry Commission announced a new project to encourage the creation of new woodlands across the country. The sixteen million pound scheme intended not only to boost wildlife, and reduce flooding, but also as a simple yet small way of addressing some of the effects of the pressing climate emergency. Recognising the integral and important role that trees play in locking up carbon from our atmosphere. This announcement builds on an existing pledge from the government to increase tree planting to 30,000 hectares by 2025 and the noticed need that we need more trees to help us in all sorts of ways, not least in supporting how we as human beings seek to tread a little more gently on the earth that so often we have uncompromisingly exploited.

One only needs to look at the scenes of mass deforestation in so many parts of the world to notice that, even if our efforts close to home are seem rather insignificant, they are necessary. A reality noted in the plans being made to mark the seventieth anniversary of her Majesty the Queen's accession to the throne next year, with the intended creation of 'The Queen's Green Canopy'. A unique planting initiative which will invite people across the land to plant a tree for the jubilee for the benefit of generations to come.

Such an enterprise recognises that the act of choosing to plant a tree, regardless of any other incentive, is in and of itself, a selfless act. It is a decision that is marked and moulded by a spirit of openness and generosity owing to the fact that it takes time for trees to mature, grow and develop. In planting a seed we never see instantaneous results or immediate blessing. For example, a typical English oak tree though it might start producing across at around 40 years old, it only matures at 80 to 120 years, generally being productive for 300 years before resting and then moving on its life-cycle. As such, the planting of any seed is an act of faith. Looking to God to tend and give the growth for the future, entrusting our work to him; and with it the realisation that such an act does not bring any noticeable benefit to ourselves, confronting us with the facts of our own transitory nature.

It's perhaps no wonder then that the prophet Ezekiel writing in the desolate days of Israel's subjugation and eventual captivity in Babylon in the early decades of the sixth century BC, when the misery and forsakenness of God's people was uppermost in the prophetic imagination, that he uses the imagery of planting a tree to symbolise the faithfulness of the Lord's promises.

To set the scene: the failure of Israel to attend to the works and ways of righteousness, giving way to selfishness, introspection and pride has culminated in impending disaster. The peoples' faithlessness has been to their folly, the covenant lies broken and now as recompense Israel's community is to be divided and scattered. If you read the verses that precede the section we heard this morning, then you're faced with a rather bleak proposition with any hint of brightness in

short supply. The message is clear: if we only look to ourselves then we'll falter and if we're only concerned with our own sense of happiness or security at the expense of others, then we're not going to get very far. Any schemes or plans we might have without God's help and direction will ultimately flounder, even though we might think otherwise.

Thus, its with all this in mind that the prophecy dramatically alters, as the word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel and declares a new beginning, with a greater hope for the future. *'Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out...I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.'* Even amidst dreadful circumstances, God's plans will mature and despite all appearances to the contrary, his faithful love will be established once again.

And what's more, this tree when it is planted will flourish and bear fruit, a source of abundant blessing. As we hear *'under it every kind of bird will live; in the shadow of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.'* The prophet testifying that the tree the Lord was promising to plant would ultimately bring life and hope and purpose. Looking ahead not simply to a time when Israel's material fortunes would be reversed, but God's rule and kingdom acknowledged in the humbling of the powerful and the elevating of the powerless.

Such a message received in its original context by a disenfranchised group of refugees yearning for things to be different, offered both constancy and comfort. Ezekiel's words exhorting his hearers to a deeper trust and a more sincere faith, signified in a hope that what the Lord had planted would, in his time (*and note not theirs*) come to fruition. A prayerful position we've perhaps learned to lean on a little more following our experiences over the last fifteen months.

Such an understanding, is of course, emphasised in Jesus words to us today in Mark's gospel. In attending to the parables that Jesus chooses to share with those gathered around him, both of which have as their focus what the evangelist calls *'the kingdom of God'*. A phrase we find repeated fourteen times throughout the gospel. In talking to those who would listen, Christ unfolds what it might mean through picture, allegory and metaphor to seek, know and receive such a kingdom. The kingdom that Ezekiel had foretold long before and which was still awaited. And the kingdom that somehow was revealed and had arrived in this rabbi and carpenter originating from the margins of respectable society in first century Palestine; in who he was and what he said and did.

Consequently, both the parable of the growing seed and then the parable of the mustard seed are stories of surprise. In listening to them one could not imagine the eventual conclusion from the beginning, just as the beleaguered exiles of Israel couldn't imagine Ezekiel's vision of a prosperous and peaceable future in the midst of their fear and distress. For such, as Jesus indicates, is the kingdom of God. Its coming will always catch us out, surprise us, interrupt us.

It can't be moulded to fit a particular agenda, vision or preconceived notion, but will always lead us out of ourselves, clarifying for us what it means to live, work and serve as those called into a community whose purpose is found in following the God whom Jesus reveals. Hence, the kingdom that Christ inaugurates and brings to our attention, breaks open our understanding and leads us into greater dependence on the God in whose time and perspective all things are fulfilled and found.

This is what the first parable, the story of the growing seed, is all about. Only found in Mark's gospel, it's short, relevant and to the point, couching our appreciation of God and his work in almost the most ordinary way possible. *'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 truth of God's caring concern and loving involvement in his world described in such a basic and everyday way. The kingdom Jesus promises, come not in glory but in the common things of life. The routines of day-to-day living signposts to the nurturing plans of the Lord.

Life goes on as it always has, yet Jesus says, even in this the kingdom comes; regardless of any work the farmer does the seed sprouts and grows and so eventually can be harvested. Slowly and imperceptibly the seed is nurtured and comes to maturity, and even though its worth might seem negligible, its potential takes time to be fully realised. For it is God who is the source of its growth.

In an age and time, in a church and society, which so often wants to remedy quickly perceived challenges and problems, that searches for quick wins and easy answers, such a message is not only refreshing but quite revolutionary. For such is the kingdom of God.

✚ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Church of England online weekly service for the Second Sunday after Trinity can be found [here](#).

The Collect
for The Second Sunday after Trinity

**Lord, you have taught us
that all our doings without love are nothing worth:
send your Holy Spirit
and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,
the true bond of peace and of all virtues,
without which whoever lives is counted dead before you.
Grant this for your only Son Jesus Christ's sake,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.**

Old Testament Reading

Thus says the Lord God:
I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;
I will set it out.
I will break off a tender one
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.

Ezekiel 17.22-24

New Testament Reading

So 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 judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For 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!

2 Corinthians 5.6-17

Gospel Reading

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.'

He 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.

Mark 4.26-34

Prayers of Intercession
during Ordinary Time

In peace, let us pray to Jesus our Lord,
who ever lives to make intercession for us.

Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.

Saviour of the world,
be present in all places of suffering, violence and pain,
and bring hope even in the darkest night.
Inspire us to continue your work of reconciliation today.

Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.

Lord of the Church,
empower by your Spirit all Christian people,
and the work of your Church in every land.
Give us grace to proclaim the gospel joyfully in word and deed.

Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.

Shepherd and Guardian of our souls,
guide and enable all who lead and serve this community
and those on whom we depend for our daily needs.
Grant that we may seek the peace and welfare of this place.

Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.

Great Physician,
stretch out your hand to bring comfort, wholeness and peace
to all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit.
Fill us with compassion, that we may be channels of your healing love.

Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.

Conqueror of death,
remember for good those whom we love but see no longer.
Help us to live this day in the sure and certain hope of your eternal victory.

Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.

Let us commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray, to the mercy and protection of God.