

Trinity 3 2024 April Beckerleg

Ezekiel 17.22-end

2 Corinthians 5.6-10 [11-13] 14-17

Mark 4.26-34

Both the Old Testament passage from Ezekiel and those 2 familiar parables from Mark focus on the idea of growth. The seed sprouts, we don't know how, there is something strange and wonderful about how this tiny seed somehow contains within it all it needs to grow into something completely new.

Growth. We do seem to use this word quite a lot, as a metaphor for a kind of maturity, or increasing knowledge or wisdom – we talk about spiritual or emotional growth, and sometimes its used to describe the effect a difficult experience has on us – almost as a joke sometimes, when something doesn't go our way people call it; 'an opportunity for growth'.

And I think perhaps it is quite a short step from that concept to the assumption that our gospel story is not so much Gardeners world, with Jesus as an 1st century Monty Don, and more about advice for our inner spiritual life, how we are to be in the world.

The first thing that strikes me then is that growth is about change. Things cannot stay the same at the same time as growing, it kind of goes with the territory. That isn't always easy for us, as humans I think we are hard wired to find change difficult, from little children to those of us as we get older, it can be a challenge to negotiate changes, especially those outside of our control.

I am guessing that pretty much everyone has tried growing something at some time. whether you are a passionate gardener or simply someone who has tried to keep a spider plant alive, we all have a sense of how things grow, we know the rules ot follow, we may have experience and expectations of how something will grow,

However there remains a mysterious and risky process in growing things – despite our best attempts – we are not always able to control how things grow – whether that is not enough or too much, or in the wrong place or in a way we don't want, that natural sense of growth escapes, it is unpredictable, dependant on events outside our control, we have to learn patience and acceptance. And yet, we still continue. We still get that spark of pleasure when we see the tiny green shoots coming from the bare earth. But this growth is not linear, it speeds up and slows down – a mighty tree is still growing, even if it looks the same, measure it year by year, and you can see that it continues to grow, and transform into something different – and so do we. And we can play our part in this, as we see God's Spirit at work building the kingdom within us and around us and through us, can we be open to learn more, to stay curious, to build on the experiences we have to become different people than we were yesterday – that is an essential part of life generally, as well as our Spiritual life.

So I wonder how I might measure this element of my own growth? What can I find that is new and different, where and how can I prepare to have my mind changed and broadened, and become transformed as a result.

For some of us that is reading, swapping book recommendations, for others it might be speaking to someone new and hearing their perspective on things – like our monthly Spiritual Reasoning group, where we meet with local Muslims to talk about matters of faith in everyday life, and how our understanding of Scripture affect that.

It may be much closer to home, perhaps talking to someone in the coffee time after church we may find ourselves being challenged or surprised by a particular conversation – that we might need to reflect on, and wonder about.

This process enables us to find things to stand for –it helps us to form our core values which we build our lives upon, it helps us to be part of the kingdom that the Spirit is building.

The second thing that occurs to me from our stories is that the kingdom of God does not spring, fully formed and complete, but rather is constantly being built over time, in different forms and different ways – it is found everywhere, peeking out from the flagstones, delicate as a new leaf, and as strong as a mighty tree.

God delights in variety, difference and diversity, and so the kingdom will reflect that. It is a very human response to think that our way of being is the only one, but Jesus was constantly asking his listeners to reconsider, to notice, to listen, and to pay attention to what was happening around them, the signs of God's kingdom springing up in the expected and unexpected ways.

Perhaps this is why Jesus found the repeated stories of growing things so compelling, that God's Spirit is at work throughout the world, which can be mysterious, surprising, capricious even, tiny and hidden in some places and grand and expansive in others, tenaciously growing through the fragments of lives like the cracks in the pavements, spreading out and finding places to flourish.

And finally, the purpose of all this growing is described clearly, it is to provide nests, to give shelter, it is that creation of community which is such a marker of the kingdom, not each in their own private space, but flourishing together for the good of all. That all may seek shelter in its branches.

This is perhaps the point at which we might see how God's purpose is working out, and how we play our part in this. We are of course familiar with our relationship with the natural world here at St Nicolas, we are proud to have our Silver Eco award and are working towards gold. award. We cannot listen to these Gospel stories without understanding that the impact we have on creation matters. We take this charge seriously, since you may remember it has become one of our baptismal promises, when we renew those vows at Easter and at other times, to 'safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the Earth'

indeed it might be said that growth is the natural and instinctive urge of all living things, We often say that parables are not so much a puzzle to solve but a mystery to enter, and this mystery of growth is one which we can embrace and delight in as we allow for the unfolding of

the Creator's purpose for us and through us as we seek to be open to God, open to one another and open to our community.