

I've done a lot of gardening this week, so I was amused to see the solidly horticultural nature of today's Old Testament and gospel readings. Given that on Mondays I work at Kew, I thought I'd better check the accuracy of the descriptions, and I was very pleased to discover that you can propagate cedar of Lebanon trees from cuttings, although it's difficult. I also checked out the mustard seed. This isn't the mustard in 'mustard and cress' – that seed is too big for this story, and the resulting plant is much too small. Apparently it is most likely to be 'black mustard', a relation of cabbages and sprouts, which is grown extensively in the Middle East and can get up to about eight feet tall in a single season. Admittedly you'd have to be quite a small bird to nest safely in its branches – a wren perhaps, or a sparrow – but we know that God looks after sparrows and he can, after all, do marvellous things.

Leaving the botany aside, what are we looking at today? A single theme runs through the Old Testament reading, the gospel and the psalm – that of growth. Something starts very small, insignificant, tender and vulnerable, and ends up strong and magnificent, giving shelter and safety. We probably know the two gospel parables well, but the Old Testament one is less familiar. The prophet Ezekiel and the Israelites are in exile in Babylon, driven out of the Promised Land, dispossessed and disinherited. God is punishing them for generations of disobedience. But all is not lost. Ezekiel describes how God will re-establish Israel in its own land. He will plant his chosen people in a prominent position on the mountain height. Just as the cedar was the largest and most valued of all trees, so the Israelites will become the most prominent people. They will become a focus and a shelter for others, and all the other trees – the surrounding tribes – will recognize what God has done. Everyone will flourish when they live under God's over-arching protection.

The same metaphor is repeated in the psalm: obey the commandments. Do what is right in the sight of the Lord, and you will prosper and be fruitful, even after many years. It's an attractive picture, especially if you are getting that bit older.

The gospel parables are, explicitly, about the Kingdom of God. Throughout his ministry Jesus tells stories about the Kingdom. Whenever he does this he uses examples which are part of the everyday lives of his listeners: seeds, grapevines, sheep, weeds, weddings, lost coins. None of them is a perfect analogy – the mustard shrub dies down completely at the end of the year, and the Kingdom certainly doesn't do that. But each one illustrates an important aspect. Jesus is helping his hearers think about and understand what God is offering them. He's trying to make it as straightforward and clear as possible.

A few days ago I was at a talk given by a very sincere and serious bishop, part of which was about attracting people to Christianity and encouraging them to come to church. 'Talk to them about grace and salvation and atonement', he said. I don't know what sort of people you meet every day, but I know the ones I do things with wouldn't have a clue if I talked to them about atonement. I can just imagine their eyes glazing over and their attempts to find something else to talk about or somewhere else to be. Surely we should be using language and examples that make sense straight away. One of the reasons

Bishop Michael Curry's sermon was such a sensation was that it used everyday language; something most of the congregation obviously didn't expect to hear in church! His style and sheer exuberant enthusiasm were also essential – and apparently the Archbishop of Canterbury now wants there to be more of that in our sermons – but they would have been useless if he had been talking in 'church-speak'.

There have been several surveys which show that fewer and fewer people have a favourable view of 'The Church'. But when they were asked if they knew a Christian, and what their opinion was of that person, they were much more positive. God's Kingdom grows because Christians work steadily at following Christ and becoming, in many different ways, better people. But Christians also meet other people and talk to them, not about atonement, but about love and forgiveness and acceptance and belonging. They tell their stories about what God has done for them, and sometimes they find ways to show what God has been doing for others, even if the others hadn't realised that God was at work. When that happens, the Kingdom grows. From the tiniest beginning, a chat over a cup of coffee or maybe a quick helping hand with a problem, a seed can be sown that will grow into something strong and magnificent. But only if we plant it. So, sometime this week, find an opportunity to tell a little of your story to someone else, and make sure you do so in good plain English.