



**Sharing together; and Sermon. Revd Dr Janet E Tollington on the Second Sunday after Trinity, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021**

**Readings: Mark 4:26-34, Ezekiel 17:22-24, 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17**

**Sharing Together**

A lot of stories about Jesus connect him with agriculture and harvests, which isn't surprising because these activities were very much the experience of the people around him and the ones to whom he spoke. Our world is rather different but we probably have enough experience of growing things in gardens to understand the imagery.

Have you ever planted seeds and then enjoyed watching them grow? I enjoy growing vegetables and plant all sorts of seeds in the greenhouse or direct in the ground and it is amazing to see how quite tiny seeds can grow into large bushy plants like sprouting broccoli. Each year the children next door plant sunflowers and have a competition to see which will grow the tallest. Sometimes the plants grow up really high and then a huge golden flower opens at the top that eventually turns into a big seed head that the birds enjoy eating. Birds don't nest in any of these plants; but I think we can understand what Jesus was saying about the mustard seed and what grows from it.

Sunflower seeds are big and most of their growth is upwards. In comparison carrot seeds are tiny and although they produce some leaves above ground, it is the long orange root that grows downwards that is the part we harvest to eat. We don't see what is going on underground and I love the surprise when I discover just how long some of my carrots have grown each year.

Of course it is what's happening out of sight, in the soil, that produces the growth and the harvest; and that is where God is at work. But we need to play our part by planting the seeds in the first place. We also need to keep on top of the weeds to stop them crowding out the good plants as they start to grow. Sometimes we need to supply a stake to be a support for a growing plant; and I'm all too aware that if I didn't clear the ground of stones before I sowed my carrot seeds, the roots will split into misshapen, knobbly ones that aren't very nice to eat.

Jesus likened the kingdom of God to the harvest that is produced. It is good to know that God will bring this kingdom into existence, working in ways and places that are out of our sight. But God also expects us to play our part in preparing the ground, sowing seeds, and keeping watch to see if there is something else we can do during the growing season to give the plants their best chance of producing good produce.

So let us make sure, as followers of Jesus, that we sow seeds of love and kindness and all kinds of things that have the potential to produce a harvest of good things in the world around us. Then let's see what God begins to bring into growth and be ready to work in the name of Jesus to support that growth until the harvest of God's kingdom comes.

**Sermon:**

Ezekiel 17 begins with a lengthy parable or allegory about two eagles and the top of a cedar tree. The interpretation that follows explains that the eagles represent Babylon and Egypt; and that Judah's attempt to escape the rule of Babylon, during Zedekiah's reign, by transferring allegiance to Egypt would be thwarted by God, because it breached an oath he had made and, more importantly, broke the covenant. This fits the historical context of exile before Babylon's second invasion, the destruction of the temple and the final end of Judah's monarchy.

Then comes the short parable we heard, picking up the same idea of the top of cedar tree but focusing on what God will do with it. This time no interpretation is given but it ends with the idea of God bringing down the mighty and raising up the lowly; or bringing one thing to an end and enabling another to grow and flourish. In context it's tempting to imagine that the cedar tree is again a reference to the Davidic line of kings; and the mountain height of Israel would probably be Jerusalem. The meaning seems to be that a restored king will flourish and provide protection for all who live under his rule – and when this happens it will be a demonstration of God's sovereignty and power over the nations of the world. But to have this meaning these verses need to be secondary and belong to a later period during, or after, the exile, as many scholars have argued; and certainly the hopeful message that they convey is out of keeping with the words of condemnation on Israel and Judah expressed throughout Ezekiel 1-24

But read in this way the parable has a similar meaning to 'the shoot that will come out from the stump of Jesse' that we read of in Isaiah 11:1 and the 'righteous Branch' for David that God will 'raise up ... to reign as king and deal wisely' according to Jeremiah 23:5 (cf.33:15) and it's another example of the messianic hopes that began to emerge during the exile. But is it right to read this parable in this way?

It is often argued that a parable has a single meaning and that we should be wary of looking for alternative, or deeper, meanings in the parables of Jesus, because the context in which they are set makes their main message clear. But if that is true about all biblical parables, which context should we consider – the historical one, or where a passage appears within a text?

Scholars offer us a great deal of guidance about how to read and understand the Bible and I am grateful for all their insights (indeed some would include me in their number); but I am also wary of an arrogance that suggests we can be certain about the meaning of any passage. It is now acknowledged by literary theorists that we can never know what an author intended to communicate to an original audience, let alone what a later editor might have been trying to convey to a different group of readers. Nor can we know how hearers/readers interpreted what they received. Like all preachers I have often been amazed after a service by a member of the congregation who thanks me for saying something during the sermon, that bears little relationship to what I had thought I had said!

How we engage with any passage from the Bible depends more upon our own context, experience, concerns, ideas, knowledge, than anything the original writers may have had in mind. So that means we may all interpret a parable differently. I think that means that a parable will potentially have multiple meanings; and especially if it is read in isolation, separated from its literary context, or without any consideration of when and where it may have originated.

Wherever we encounter them parables are used as a kind of illustration within a speech or narrative, to draw attention to a point that is being made, or to help explain more complicated ideas. They draw on the experience, knowledge, context of the people who originally used them, which is why Jesus talks of shepherds, lost sheep, sowers, landlords, tenants, vineyards, fishermen, etc. but often such imagery conveys something very different to us and even more so to people who haven't grown up been told the Bible stories. So how should we engage with the Bible and use it effectively as we try to share our faith with other people in society.

We are all aware of how difficult the language of the fatherhood of God has become to many in our society for whom the model of father is absent or abusive. The worlds of agriculture and fishery bear no relationship to what existed in Biblical times. Economic structures in society are completely different; and of course we need to be aware that even in our world these vary enormously from county to country – an illustration that communicates well in urban Britain may convey a very different picture to someone in rural India. What we are trying to say may not be heard as we had hoped. (A problem that often seems to arise with e-mail and social media correspondence.)

Some translations of the Bible have used the language of a particular cultural group to try to make it speak into 'their' world – but inevitably they rapidly become outdated as societies change. Perhaps what is important is that we are constantly alert to the language and imagery that we use when we engage with others. What matters most is being aware of the other person's context, experience, cultural norms as well as our own – and never assuming that they are the same. To do that we need to get to know people, to take an interest in them, to discover what makes them tick and interests them, before we attempt to share the gospel with them, otherwise there is a serious risk of miscommunication. We need to work hard at understanding the message of the Bible, the teaching of Jesus, for ourselves; and then work hard at translating that into language that will communicate well with someone else.

I tried to do that earlier in our worship with the parables from Mark's gospel; but what about the one from Ezekiel? How do you understand the image of a sprig from the top of a cedar being planted and nurtured to become another great tree that provides protection for all who see shelter from it? There is something about continuity and newness; and it is certainly a positive, hopeful image. Might it say something about the hopes we have for the mission of Downing Place URC as we move forward? What about the verse that speaks of bringing down the high tree and lifting up the low one? Does it challenge you to consider whether you might have been getting a bit above yourself in the way you have engaged with others in a particular situation? Or does it encourage you to have more confidence in yourself and to believe that you do have something worthwhile to contribute to a project, or as a new bit of work? If you've been feeling rather jaded, especially while so much activity has been curtailed, does the image of a dry tree flourishing once more speak to you?

What do you think the parable we heard from Ezekiel means? How does it speak to you? And what message from it do you want to share with others as good news from God?

May you discern good news in something I have said this morning and may it nurture you in your journey of faith as a disciple of Jesus. Amen