

The Second Sunday after Pentecost, 14 Jun 2009
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

We have many images of the Church (as in that favorite hymn, The Church's one foundation, where we see the church as a building, and images of the Kingdom as in Jesus' parable of the Mustard Seed in today's Gospel. These images help us to understand and live into these important realities of our lives as the Church of God.

I mentioned last week that this begins the long 'ordinary time' of the liturgical year, the season after Pentecost. It is a green time – and green, as we well know in Oregon, is for growing. These are the weeks and months when the liturgical focus is on us, on the Church, on the building of the Kingdom in our own time and place.

It is about us and how we are called to be disciples, how we are to carry on the work of Christ in our lives, how we are to build up the Church blessing the world, how we are to be the hands and feet of Christ curing the sick, blessing the children, soothing the mad, feeding the hungry, reconciling the estranged.

We have two descriptions of trees in today's readings which can give us hope and direction. The first, and probably less known, is from Ezekiel. In it God speaks of taking a cutting from a giant tree, a tiny cutting of the new growth, and planting it. Then God will nurture it so that the tiny sprig will itself grow into a giant and noble tree. And its size and prominent placement will announce to the world the presence and power of God. But also the nature of God, for this is not just an expression of strength, but an expression of all-embracing love. This tree provides shelter for every kind of winged creature. In the image of this cedar we see God as the source and sustainer of all life.

It is easy to see why this reading is paired with the Parable of the Mustard Seed, in which Jesus uses the image of something very small being planted and then growing into something very large, to provide shelter for those in need. And Jesus is specifically saying that this reality, which most of his hearers would have experienced, of the tiny mustard seed growing into a sizable shrub, is a helpful way to think about God's kingdom.

The two aspects which are highlighted in both descriptions are the initial smallness growing into something great, and the shelter provided. So the Kingdom of God, which Jesus inaugurated and which we are meant to continually build, is all about providing shelter – and we are told with confidence, that it will provide shelter, no matter how small and improbable its beginnings.

The kingdom of God, the reign of God, has nothing to do with domination, or military victory, or royal splendor. The Kingdom of God is the Shalom of God, when everything is done according to the ultimate purposes of God from the beginning of creation, purposes of peace and justice, of reconciliation and provision for everyone. All the different kinds of bird can nest in this tree.

It is very appropriate that our calendar worked out so that this weekend, the first of the long green time, should bring the first viewing of our summer video series, *Christianity: the First Two Thousand Years*. This video exploration will give us an opportunity to see how the seed planted in first century Palestine grew into the largest religion in the world today.

It is hard to imagine a more unpromising beginning. What seed did Jesus leave for the blessing of the world? Just a small band of people, mostly Jewish, but some Roman, almost all ill-educated and lacking any influence in the culture.

They lived in a real backwater. For the Jews, Jerusalem was the center of the world, the seat of God. For everyone else, it was a small city in a small colony, whose main product seemed to be rebellion. They did not have great literature or art like Athens or Alexandria. They did not have power and might like Rome. People did not look to Israel for anything remarkable. And then many of this small band of undereducated, untraveled men and women in this place off the beaten track were slaughtered during the political turmoil of the first decades of the Church.

This is indeed a small seed, a mere sprig. I think it is hard for us to realize how small the beginning was, how improbable it was that anything at all should grow out of this unpromising planting. Because our experience is of the greatness that grew. We live in a world where virtually everyone has heard of Jesus, where there are magnificent churches and cathedrals all over the world, in countries and on continents that the first Christians never even imagined.

The growth has been extraordinary. The nurturing love of God has blessed it amazingly. And it has indeed provided shelter for all manner of 'birds'. Consider all of the hospitals established by the church all over the world (including most of the hospitals in our own area). Consider all of the educational institutions, from the many great universities of Europe to tiny schools for the education of girls throughout Africa, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Consider El Porvenir, Food for the Poor, Church World Service, Episcopal Relief and Development, all of the innumerable programs for the feeding and relief of the poor all over the world established in the name of Christ.

This is the Church – and it is the Church helping to bring in the Kingdom. It's growth and its work inspire us.

But what about our own lives? When we look at the world around us and see so many people suffering from current economic difficulties, see the tremendous challenges presented by escalating climate change, see the estrangement between different parts of our own society and among the peoples of the world, see starvation and epidemic diseases and desertification – and then remember that we are meant to be part of the tree sheltering everyone, we can become thoroughly discouraged.

I cannot feed everyone. I cannot put a stop to the growing carbon emissions. I cannot show everyone how to love and appreciate one another, and stop fighting. It is easy to succumb to hopelessness.

Then it is useful to remember those tree and shrub images. God created this world so that great things come from small beginnings. Mustard bushes only grow out of those small seeds. I can imagine myself as a seed. I can imagine the Saint James community as a seed. And these seeds, planted and tended by God, will grow, will provide the shelter needed, will provide the evidence of God's loving activity for all to see.

So what I am suggesting is that we hold that image in our hearts.

As we think about what we are to do as a church community, we want to remember that God planted us here, planted us to grow and thrive and bless the community around us. This can give us the confidence to take on some of the challenges we see in terms of nurturing and helping people in our area. In our prayers, we can ask for guidance so that we can see who needs us and what we can do.

As we think about what we are to do as individuals, we remember that God has planted us in our various communities and workplaces. We may be small seeds, but the source of all life is nurturing us, giving us whatever is needed to nurture others, What our growth looks like, and how we bring the kingdom into our respective places will be different for each of us, as we are each different. But we know what God did with an uneducated band of fishermen and prostitutes. So we know that God will continue to bless the world through us, however small and inadequate we may feel.

Whether a mustard bush or a towering cedar, God will give the growth and make great things happen. And we will go forward with confidence like the Psalmist who reminds us,

“ It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord, *
and to sing praises to your Name, O Most High;
To tell of your loving-kindness early in the morning *
and of your faithfulness in the night season.” Amen.