

Ezekiel 17:22-44

Ezekiel, in this reading, is passionately clear on his understanding of God. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the Lord of history. He is a God who can reverse the course of history and to get this message across, we have the wonderful image of God the planter of the new cedar shoots. The historical problem with which the prophet is dealing is that King Zedekiah had been foolish in putting his lot and the lives of the Hebrew people into the hands of plotters who were rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon who was ruling over them. This was foolish and it was sinful. Foolish because the nation could not withstand the power and military might of the Babylonians and sinful because it did not take into account the role God had to play in their futures. They had grown tired of waiting, impatient for a return to the good times and so had gone ahead and acted on their own. Foolish, at least, in the eyes of the prophet Ezekiel and built on sinful arrogance and pride.

God has declared that the nation has lost its way, that it is guilty of the sin of apostasy – putting aside the religion of their forebears and taking on the philosophies and wisdom of the world around them. The person to carry the blame for this was the King. It was his duty to point out to the people, their sins and their failings but he chose the path of peaceful living, the comforts of his office rather than the more difficult path of leading his people in the ways of God. This is why the prophet refers to him as a “desecrated and wicked man”.

The fable that we have in chapter 17 then is the way Ezekiel chooses to use to teach the people an important lesson. If the pagan king of Babylon will not let the nations under his rule get away with rebellion and the breaking of the treaties that he had with them, it is unlikely that the King of heaven and Earth, the Lord of Creation is going to allow the people who are in a covenant relationship with him to get away with their rebellion and sin.

We are presented in the fable a powerful image of God. While it might seem, on the earthly level, that King Nebuchadnezzar is an all powerful king, all he is actually doing is carrying out the will of God. The Babylonian king, for his own reasons, is going to punish Israel for its rebellion. Without knowing it, he is actually carrying out the will of God who is using the king to carry out his wishes. This is because Yahweh is truly the Lord of all things.

But the story also shows us another side of Yahweh. Yes, he allows the king of Babylon to mete out a just punishment on the people of Israel but he also uses his divine powers to minimize the harm that is done, to ensure that the destruction and exile is not the end of his people. Nebuchadnezzar is a destroyer but Yahweh is a planter, a reconciler and the author of a new life in his care. This is brought out beautifully in the image of God reaching down and taking a small shoot from the top of the mountains and planting it in Israel. This shoot will grow and spread out and become a mighty tree, one that will feed and shelter every bird and animal that comes to it. It is a truly magnificent image of God.

Yes, there is punishment for sins but God is no mere executioner. Rather, he allows the sins of his people to consume them. He does not need to send down punishment for the people's sins bring with them their own punishment. That is the way of sin. We may think we have managed to escape unnoticed and unharmed but somewhere down the track our unrepented sinfulness will bring us to destruction.

What God does do is to plant a new beginning for the remnant who are not destroyed by their sins, who repent and turn to him. He takes what is a small beginning (the seedling) and nurtures it until it becomes a mighty people. But it is done in God's way, by God's power, in God's time and that is always the hardest bit. Like Israel, we do not like the idea of exile, of

difficult times and the anguish of suffering and so are tempted to take the future into our own hands. Ezekiel says that what is needed is to trust in God and walk in his ways. As the Lord of all that happens in our lives he is with us, guiding us, guarding us, strengthening us and healing us and always offering us the opportunity of new life. But the trust and hope has to come from us. While we attempt to remain in charge of our lives and our destinies, God the healer cannot come to us.

Mark 4:26-34:

Mark begins these parables on the Kingdom by comparing the Kingdom of God to a man who is sowing the seeds. Note, it is not a comparison with the seed – that will come later. The Kingdom is compared to the man sowing the seed. And what an odd farmer he is! He sleeps day and night and does nothing in the farm. Somehow, the seed manages to grow all on its own, though we all know from personal experience, that seeds planted and sown in this way will not produce much of a harvest. Harvesting – and the Kingdom – require a little more of the farmer than just that little investment of energy.

But there is also another aspect to the parable. Like the early community's initial response to the proclamation of the Kingdom, there is not always a great deal of a movement to be seen. Despite all of their initial enthusiasm, the movement of people into the Church was small and it must have seemed to those early believers, that God was working far too slowly for their liking and they may well have been tempted to give up the struggle for mission. Mark reminds his people here that the Kingdom has an inner dynamic that is far greater than mere human insight and human ability and energy. The seed planted will bear fruit in its own time, in its own way and their responsibility was to continue to plant, to weed, to nurture and to feed the peoples of their time with the fruits of the Kingdom. This Kingdom of God does not depend on human efforts and human insights will never fully comprehend what God is doing.

This first parable then speaks of the inevitable growth of God's Kingdom, even when at times we begin to doubt that it is having much of an impact on our world. Like the people of Mark's own time, it would be wonderful if only we could see the world change before the Good News lived and proclaimed and we can begin to lose heart when miracles do not happen. This first parable reassures us that God is working away in creation, bringing all things to himself in his own way, in his own time. His expectation is that we tend his garden believing that in collaborating with the Father, the Kingdom will grow and spread and will feed the earth with its produce.

In the second story we find an equally important message of reassurance. The mustard seed is incredibly small (700 seeds to a gramme) and yet the tree into which it grows is quite tall, often more than three metres in height. The point of the simile is this contrast between the insignificant beginning and the mighty end product. As people would be foolish to dismiss the mustard seed because it is so tiny so the people would be equally foolish to dismiss the Church because it appears to be so small and powerless. The believers should not become too impatient for the Kingdom to appear in all its might. It will come in its fullness one day and knowing that this fullness is on its way is of some comfort, particularly when what we have today seems so small and insignificant.

This is where the story from Mark links us back to the story from Ezekiel. It is the wish of God in both stories that the birds of the air find shelter in those trees and food from its branches. That is why God plants them and cares for them. Those people could not find the food and nourishment from other sources – not from politics, not from the merchants, not from any of the human institutions and organisations around at the time. The food they received from those groups did not satisfy them and could not shelter them from all of the woes and evils in the world around them. Only God can do that for all other food and all other shelter is of only passing value.

What God does is provide a giant oak, a mighty mustard tree and all who are hungry can have their needs met and all who need shelter from the storms of their lives can find safe refuge. But he does it in his way, in his time and with his power.

Conclusion:

We are warned then, not to underestimate the power of the Kingdom at work in the world around us. We can be tempted to look at our Church and worry about its future, to become concerned when we see our communities growing older and becoming smaller and smaller. We can panic and exhaust ourselves in trying to bring things back to the way we think they should be. Mark's message to his community is to keep their eyes firmly fixed on what God wants them to be doing and leave the growing bit up to him. It is God who makes mighty trees grow out of small seeds, not us and the Lord of the Garden will do things in his own way. At each stage of its existence, the tree has an integrity all of its own. When it is a seed it is true and authentic to itself at that stage of its growth. A seed does not have to be mighty in size. A half grown tree is the same. It is not imperfect just because it is small. It is just small. The same goes for our faith communities today. Size does not count. What matters is the integrity of our lives as disciples. Being faithful, tending the garden, weeding, feeding, chasing away the birds and the predators, these are all things to which we are called by God. But it is God and God alone who does the growing bit.

Let us pray as we move into our new week, that we can allow ourselves to be reassured that God has a weather eye on his Church and will bring it along in his own good time. With the burden of running the Church removed from us, let us also pray that we will devote our time and our energies into growing in faithfulness.