

'Planted in the House of the Lord'

Ezek 17: *the cedar ... I will plant ...*

Ps 91: *the just will flourish like the palm tree ... like a Lebanon cedar*

2Cor: *living in the body, or exiled from it, we are intent on pleasing Him*

Mk 4: 26–34: *the seed is sprouting & growing; how, he does not know.*

Scripture so often uses images from the natural world, and that's not surprising, is it? The people of Old Testament times — and it was still true in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD, Jesus's days — was fundamentally an agrarian population, surviving by subsistence farming; many if not most lived close to the land, and were involved in small-scale farming and animal rearing. It's no wonder, then, that the Scripture draws on images that spoke easily to such a people: images of the land, the landscape, the natural world, the farming that was second nature to their society. Such images also have an innate beauty to them. Don't we all at heart just love nature programmes, or gazing at a stunning country panorama? We are naturally a part of that creation that God has made, and its beauty to us is linked at source to the absolute beauty that God Himself is, and that we are, or are meant to be.

Today, both the first reading from the 6<sup>th</sup>-c. BC prophet Ezekiel, and the Gospel words of Christ, use some gorgeous

analogies drawn from nature ... the *little tree sapling* that the Lord replants and which grows into a great and mighty Lebanon cedar; the *seed planted by the sower* which grows slowly but surely towards the harvest; the *mustard seed* developing into a large shrub to be a shelter for all the birds ... What are the common themes of this organic analogy? Well, a variety of answers:

- (i) that it happens *naturally*, rather than artificially;
- (ii) that it has a *slowness* about it, a *gradualness* of growth;
- (iii) that it happens without the farmer's particular will or intervention, "*of its own accord*";
- (iv) that it occurs all to our *benefit*; and
- (v) that it wouldn't happen at all if, e.g., it were shut off from sunlight or rain, or uprooted; i.e. excluded from its natural environment.

What is the meaning of these dimensions of Jesus' words? Why does Our Lord use them to describe the Kingdom of God and our place in it? I think that His key point is this: that our spiritual growth *will happen naturally* if we open ourselves up to the environment we were intended to live in.

*God is that environment*, or, rather, as He is personal, not impersonal, one might call Him our ‘*environer*,’ One who actively and personally makes Himself our natural homeland. God’s Spirit is the air we are meant to breathe; the sunlight we most need is His grace that we are supposed to bathe in and soak up. *This* is the natural and normal happy condition of man: *relationship with God*, not godlessness. Our intended state is to receive from God all that we need to flourish; sin, on the other hand, and alienation from God, is not what it means to be truly human. No — we were made for God; we were made to flourish and be blessed and happy in His grace, not to flee from it. It is wrong for us, and leads to all sorts of personal and social ills, if we cut ourselves off from God. Just as the crops ripen and the shrubs grow, naturally, without the farmer fretting overly, so if we do not isolate ourselves from prayer and the worship of God, but open ourselves up to the abundant showers of His grace, then we too will flourish, and even the tough things of life will be seen in their right context. If we remain in this true God-given environment of His, offered to us totally *gratis*, utterly for free, then we will grow in the spirit; we will not be

stunted or sickly, but tall and strong. “*Planted in the House of the Lord they will flourish in the courts of our God.*”

Maybe what we need to draw most of all from Jesus’s Gospel analogies of the farmer’s patience and trust in Providence is that *our spiritual growth can be a slow procedure*, and that we need to be very patient with ourselves and with God. If we sat watching crops grow we might wonder if anything’s happening at all; so also as we sit and pray we might sometimes wonder if anything’s happening, ... but if we stick with it, if we persevere in prayer and remain still with the Lord, gradually His goodness will seep into us through our being habitually in His presence, and we will grow strong in faith, and bear fruit, fruit that will last. The farmer learns that nature is not to be hurried; we too must learn that God the cultivator of all things hasn’t set up things of the spirit necessarily to be hurried either. (“*It is good to wait in silence for the Lord to save*” — this is one of my favourite lines from the book of Lamentations.)

Let’s really trust the Lord that by disposing ourselves here in His presence regularly — i.e. living in His unspoilt

environment, His holy Church, created precisely for our flourishing — so: at Mass, at Confession, listening attentively to His Word; abiding conscientiously by His teachings; and simply finding time faithfully & quietly each day just to be *centred on Him* (or *rooted in Him*), we are giving ourselves the very best chance of receiving the growth that He desires for us. Neither farmer, nor his crops, of themselves *merit* the growth from paltry seed to ripened and abundant grain; they haven't earned the rain, the nutrients, the sunshine — it's all a gift from on high — and yet they truly benefit from this. Likewise, we too do not *earn* the gifts of the Saviour; we are simply *recipients* of the things from above, and we are to have an attitude of gratitude, of humility, and of knowing that our loving Father knows what we need from Him even before we think to ask for it, and even if we do not know what to ask for at all.

God, I'm certain, does not mean for our faith to be hard work! He wants it to feel, as it should, the most natural and innate joy of all. It can *become* hard work, sadly, when our attitudes and actions deliberately, or just negligently, militate against His free gifts, and we let habitual hardness

of heart cause those free graces to wash off us but not enter in. When we feel that way, when we are prone to believe that God has dried up His spirit ... then we need to hear again this Gospel of today! “*Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know.*” As long as we do not hide from Him, or run away from the fountain of all mercies and salvation, then even if we sometimes believe we see little change, yet the Lord *is at work!* Do not despair; do not get despondent; do not depart! We must remain rooted in His Church, where the graces for growth are, for sure, here for the receiving: the *soil* of His holy people that is rich; the *rain* that is His constant fount of refreshing mercy, especially in Confession; the *sunshine* of the Lord Jesus's Holy Face shining out on us, especially from the Holy Eucharist.

It's getting towards the summer: more and more of us, I imagine, are thinking of a break, soon, and some holidays. I really hope that you will, at some point this summer, get to see some *stunning landscapes* — and perhaps, if we're really lucky, bathed in some summer sunshine! Connecting with nature is not some pagan alternative to Christian faith; no, of

course we do not worship *Gaia* or ‘Mother Earth,’ but we do worship the God who made them, the Creator Lord who designed everything in the cosmos to perfection, from the Big Bang, to the Lebanon Cedar, to the mustard seed, “smallest of all seeds on earth.” When we see the beauty of nature, we are, surely, drawn to admire — in fact, to *adore* — the one whose Mind gave order to the cosmos, and beauty to all its glorious manifestations. Then we might think, too, of Jesus, the *Logos* of God, the one “through whom all things were made,” Himself gazing out on such natural Israeli landscapes / skyscapes / seascapes and understandably using His wonders of the natural world to illustrate the life-saving teaching about God who made it all / who made us. This mode of divine teaching helps us know that we are to flourish, spiritually, through God’s free gift of life and obeying His commands, just as much as — in fact, way more than — these beautiful landscapes of the world of nature do, simply by obeying the Lord’s own laws of nature. *It is one world: the natural world created by and loved by God; the supernatural world, even more precious, and even more beloved of the Almighty and loving Father.*

Yes, please God, this summer will afford us each some restorative times of peace and tranquillity on holiday; some sights of nature at its best with the awe and wonder that it engenders in us; and so lead our souls to glorify God and lead us to know that He, patiently and tenderly, can give growth to our souls, and peace to our troubled lives. His care for us is greater than for the natural world — we are “*worth more than hundreds of sparrows*”! — and so we can trust He is caring for us, and given time, given faith and hope, He will prove it to us.

*“Planted in the House of the Lord they will flourish in the courts of our God, still full of sap, still green, to proclaim that the Lord is just.”*