

Reflection for 16th June (Trinity 3)

You don't have to be a farmer, or even a gardener, to understand the Bible, but it helps – because the scriptures are full of images drawn from the natural world. If you have ever tried to grow anything, you know how it can test your patience – and I speak as one to whom the world of plants and gardening is a complete mystery. The things you want to grow fail, and instead the things you never intended to grow take over. But it is possible to use the wonders of nature to your advantage, for example when taking a cutting from a prized tree or shrub and watching it miraculously grow into a carbon copy of the original plant – an image used by Ezekiel to encourage the exiled Hebrew people.

Jesus, too, used such images of cultivation to show how God could tend a tree to make it fruitful, or destroy it because it was fruitless. He also used the image of a sprouting seed, and it's easy to overlook the little parable that he tells in our reading from Mark's Gospel about the germination of seeds. It is, says Jesus, as if the ground spontaneously produces green shoots: what we take for granted, Jesus makes a matter of wonder. The sower goes to bed, and when he or she wakes up the next day the seed is beginning to sprout, without him knowing anything about it. The kingdom of God is like this, Jesus says: it grows without our seeing or even understanding it.

This drawing on nature is not just the use of imagery for its own sake, as if these are just convenient illustrations to make a point. These images from nature in the Bible are appealing to our own human experience in order to help us understand the ways of God. They are saying that God is revealed in nature as well as in human experience. That's why it helps if we have some knowledge of the natural world ourselves, and it's also why it's perhaps not surprising that Christianity is more popular in agricultural parts of Africa than in urban Europe, where most of us are at least partly isolated from the natural world.

The second image in today's passage concerns a mustard seed. The mustard plant of which Jesus spoke was an astonishingly prolific one – if you were carrying it, you might spill some of the tiny seeds on the ground without realising it, and before you knew it a dense patch of it would have grown up. It's an image of transformation. We all have the opportunity to be what Paul calls a new creation – to be transformed in the image of God, as we were always intended to be.

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