

Last summer was quite a time with so many protests everywhere. Have you ever been part of a protest or a march? It is interesting to me that although people who protest care deeply about the issue, they sing and dance and play drums and chant and even smile while they gather. It's hard work and can even be dangerous but good protests are almost like a party. Why is that? You might know about Thomas Merton: a monastic who died some years ago. He was often involved in protest movements and he warned his compatriots not get worn out with worry and work. To remember to find joy in the work. He understood something deeper behind all the protests. He seemed to understand our readings this week, which say we need to do the work and we need to have faith.

You may have noticed the theme of agriculture running through everything but Paul's epistle. This kind of analogy works well for the life of the faithful. Take the Ezekiel passage. Israel had been destroyed and the prophet was blaming it on corruption in the kingdom. So the voice of God says that even the tiniest branch can be planted and sprout into something great through the power of God. It's a hopeful passage that something can be renewed and we didn't have to rely on earthly kings who keep failing us, but can put our trust in God instead. It's implied in the context that Israel will have to work on rebuilding and as they put everything back together, faith will give them hope to carry on.

The psalm for the day refers to growth and plants as well as it mentions the righteous. Of course, the kings in Ezekiel's passage were not righteous. It's not easy to be righteous – stay focused on God's ways and be right in the eyes of God. When everyone else is doing this, the righteous are doing that. It's work. But the promise the psalmist gives is that even in old age one will bear fruit and be like a new branch or a succulent peach. It ends with the punch line that when we are righteous it proves how good the Lord is. Which implies the counterpoint that when we are not, we make a fool of God. Which leads to our reading Mark.

Last week we looked at the first parable in a section the gospel which is a collection of parables: 'Satan casting out Satan'. This week the Gospel reading presents us with the last parable and the summary statement in Mark's chapter of parables using the theme of seeds sown and growing. If the first parable gives us Jesus's diagnosis of the illness, then the image is that of reseeded human culture itself. For the healing of our species, it is going to require a restart, a reseeded. We will need to do this work but just as the farmer goes to bed and the seed does the work as it sprouts and grows, we also do the work and faith that it will sprout and grow. If we have faith in this process, eventually what we have planted may become like a cedar of Lebanon, tall and strong, or like wheat that feeds many, or like a mustard shrub that can be a place for the birds of the air to make nests in its shade.

Where do we notice seeds in our lives these days, particularly as we emerge from the pandemic? Certainly, in some way, fields have been laying fallow for a year or so. What new things is God doing where we are invited to join in the work, be faithful and watch it grow? I saw something this weekend as we had the fourth meeting to organize a new prayer time here at St. Mark's, designing it to be right for people with special needs. I was a bit concerned that after months of pre-planning and then our series of meetings the conversation was moving in a direction I didn't like. But I have to keep calm in these situations or I do us all a disservice by acting as an anxious and overbearing priest, which I do from time to time, and it never works out, at least because in my way of being, I deny what we are all about as a people and what this ministry is all about. Not to mention that the end result is usually not the best.

So I had to pose questions and sit on my hands and only say what I thought was necessary and see what happened. And wouldn't you know the idea we decided on never occurred to me. Which is how this thing usually happens in my experience. I call it the third reality. I have an idea, you have an idea, but God's will be done, when we have the faith to allow it. Not unlike sitting back and allowing a mustard seed to blossom. And the more I consider the solution the group devised, the more I love it. The prayer time will be noon on Sundays and the socializing time will occur by joining the coffee hour held by those who attend the 10 o'clock liturgy. This overlap allows for lots of people to meet and share our lives together who otherwise would not, and it prevents the kind of thing that naturally happens when we pray at different times and rarely get a chance to meet. It's the best of both worlds. In this way we are creating the greatest of all shrubs which provides a home for the birds of the air, and it is one example I have seen lately, of a small seed blossoming into something wonderful. The idea came out of nowhere, and all I had to do was keep my mouth shut and try to have faith in the process.

As we read in second Corinthians today, we are a new creation in Christ and we regard life not from a human point of view but as Jesus says, we are in the Kingdom of God. It's a both and situation. We are simultaneously surrounded by corruption and injustice as we are steeped in the holy. These two worlds existing together. To be part of the kingdom of God requires some work. To be righteous requires some work. Maybe it's protesting or perhaps opening a diaper bank at your church, or doing your job with integrity, or missing out on a spectacular vacation because you have donated to your church or a charity. But as Thomas Merton points out, the key is to work joyfully knowing that we are in God's kingdom already. We see the situation through the eyes of faith knowing that even the small green chute will grow into a great cedar or the mustard seed into a place for the birds of the air. We live in joyful hope knowing that we do the work and God provides the increase.