

### “An Unlikely Kingdom”

I remember a catchy calypso song sung by Trini Lopez. In this song the singer compares love to a lemon tree.

“Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet  
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat.”<sup>1</sup>

In the readings we have heard today the Ezekiel, the psalmist and Jesus use tree and agricultural metaphors to help us understand God’s love and the Kingdom of God. The tune may not be as catchy, but the metaphors are more powerful. Jesus used parables to teach people. He was also smart enough to use parables that came out of the knowledge base of his listeners. That is he used agricultural parables to help get across the point about the Kingdom of God. Many of us have worked in agriculture or been associated with it in one form or another so these parables might have a ring of authenticity and familiarity to us as well.

The first parable of the sower is quite interesting. Despite our own knowledge from biology class we can be fascinated or complacent about the planting, sprouting and growing of a seed into a plant and not just any plant but a plant that provides food for us. Think that one seed does not just produce another seed or even a few seeds but scores or hundreds and more. We can make the rather astounding fact of planting and harvesting rather mundane when we focus on the science of it and not the mystery.

Jesus asks us to see the seed that is sown as a mystery and thus the Kingdom of God is also. In fact his farmer is so unsure of how everything happens he is almost lazy in response to the planting and growing. There is no mention of him weeding, or dealing with pests, watering, or fertilizing. This seed seems to grow to the harvest without any help from the farmer. But when the grain is mature the farmer finally gets off his duff and harvests.

If the Kingdom of God is like that it indicates that God does most of the work. That is, God created the seed and oversees its growth. The human has to plant the seed and harvest it. Could it be that if we make the effort to plant it, whether in our heart or the fertile fields of other hearts, that God will nurture it and it will grow into something that we can harvest? God is not so much asking for us to do lots of work to make the Kingdom come, but to help get it started and patiently wait as it comes to fruition in the natural course of things. Heroic acts are less the requisite activity than faith, patience, and the willingness to allow God to act in God’s time.

To take another tack, but still in the agricultural vein, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. First a little background about the mustard plant that Jesus is talking about. It is not the mustard plant that grows the seeds for Grey Poupon or the mustard greens that some of us enjoy eating. The mustard plant Jesus speaks about comes from the seeds that you can barely see. There are some on this card I am going to pass around. The plant grows into a large shrub. I have seen photos of the shrub in which it is taller than six feet. But this shrub is not a source of food it is more of an invasive plant, a weed. And yet it provides shade and shelter for animals

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<sup>1</sup> “Lemon Tree” by Will Holt

and birds. I might understand a crop as a metaphor for the Kingdom, but a weed does not make so much sense.

Jesus is using trees and plants as metaphors as Ezekiel and the psalmist did, but notice the difference. In each of the Old Testament texts God speaks about plants as the home of God's chosen people, but it is the noble cedar of Lebanon or a palm tree. These are trees that one might think would be the better metaphor for the Kingdom. However, Jesus tends to turn things upside down in his parables. Jesus takes our expectations and messes with them. Indeed, his listeners might well have been expecting him to say the Kingdom of God is like a mighty cedar or a succulent palm tree in an oasis. Instead he picks the humble mustard plant; something that is more often considered a weed growing where it is not wanted. That is, the Kingdom of God may be where you do not expect it and come in a way you do not expect. Yet there it is providing shade, perches, and nesting places for animals and birds. You may recall that many people thought the coming of the messiah would mean the overthrow and expulsion of the Roman oppressors and the return of the Davidic kingdom. What if it is something different? What if instead it is something humble like an itinerant rabbi from the Galilee followed by a motley collection of fisherman, widows, tax collectors and such?

Could it be that the Kingdom of God is right here in front of you and everywhere you look around you? God's Kingdom could be right where we are now. There is no doubt that there is hardship, oppression, injustice, sorrow, need and much more that is wrong in the world. But we can wring our hands at the evening news and bewail the wrongs, or we can ask where God is in these things? We can look for God in the simple growing plants that feed us, or even the rather problematic weed that gets a bit too tall for our tastes.

This is not Pollyannaish. It means adjusting our vision and our hearts to be attuned to the Kingdom. It means opening our minds for new ways to hear God and see God in the world. When we do, then we respond with joy and wonder and openness to that which God gives. We fortify ourselves with the Kingdom and take it out to the locales where the hurt and pain obscure God's Kingdom. Like missionaries in a foreign land we come with open hearts and hands to help the burdened find God's Kingdom in their life. We plant the seed and see how it grows.

The Kingdom of God is not like the Wonderful Land of OZ that is distant and unreachable on this side of eternity. The Kingdom of God is right here and now. Look for it. Listen for it. Find shelter and nurture amongst its branches. Share the joy with others who can only see a weed or work or nothing good at all. It is not so much that the world is being made new, but as Paul writes **we** are being made anew to see and proclaim God's Kingdom for all.