

Tree and Seed Talk

June 2018

Ezekiel 17:22-24 (ESV)

²² Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 (ESV)

Divisions in the Church

3 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

Mark 4:26-34 (ESV)

The Parable of the Seed Growing

²⁶ And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. ³⁴ He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

Intro:



³⁴ He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

Jesus, the Word of God, speaks indirectly to most people.

Q: Why might that be?

A: He wants people to interpret according to the actual desires of their heart.

If their hearts and minds are genuine, they join the dots accordingly and get it.

If their hearts and minds are not genuine, they will either miss his message or ignore it.

We have just heard 3 passages using the metaphors of trees and seeds to say things of importance. If you don't know much about trees or seeds then that is probably a limitation to say the least! So let me say a few things about trees first and then about seeds.



If you enter the space framed by a large mature tree with many branches you will experience its atmosphere or sphere of influence.

Under the tree is shelter from rain and sun, natural air-conditioning, perfume and for many animals possibly even food.

That is what anyone who slows down to enjoy trees can become aware of.
So it is no accident that animals, especially many birds live in and around trees.

Then there is often some symbolic significance to the tree that is culture specific and not so obvious. The tree often represents something and conveys significance.

To the people of Israel the tree represented the Kingdom or Regime in which people lived just like the birds that nest and feed in the tree. It was their frame of being and unity as a people.

The nation of Israel and the dynasty of King David were imagined as a tree.
The life of the nation and its people were represented in the health of the tree.

Other nations were considered as trees too.

The world was studded with various trees of different sizes representing different kingdoms nations which do what trees do:

- They grow tall from small sprouts.
- They remain tall in their prime.
- They slowly die and fall or are suddenly cut down by catastrophe.

Ezekiel 17:22-24

So with that in mind we may hear what Ezekiel was saying with reference to trees for the people of Israel around 570 BC.

The tree of Israel had just lost its head in King Zedekiah as he was marched off to exile in Babylon and the land was de-populated by the Babylonians. It would seem all was lost. Into this Ezekiel said God would come like an eagle and pluck a green shoot from near the top -thus part of the Davidic dynasty- and plant that anew in Israel. This fresh shoot would become the new tree representing God's Kingdom in a way that would provide a home for birds from all over both on the ground and in its branches. This was a messianic prophecy for Israel as the planting of the Lord becoming a tree of God's provision to all the peoples.

²⁴ And all the trees of the field (*other nations*) shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

God can renew the dead fallen tree and bring down the forest giant. Other trees notice this.
This is Messianic prophecy that was and is being fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

With this 'tree wisdom' in mind we may appreciate Paul's message to his difficult friends in Corinth. Paul is an apostle. He plants churches as trees.

Like Ezekiel, Paul is clear that it is God who grows the tree. Only God can make a tree!
It is God's work to build and grow his Kingdom so that his people may find their life in the atmosphere God creates. This tree space is God's provision.

In that work God appoints people to serve as tree workers or gardeners.

Some are to plant and some are to water.

So Paul says to the Corinthian Church as representing an expression of God's tree:

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

This is the foundation for his message to stop obsessing about people who plant or water God's tree albeit their home and get matters into true perspective.

His message ends with an intriguing statement.

⁹For we (*Paul and Apollos*) are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

He is saying to the Corinthian Church that God is building and growing them.

God's Kingdom is grown and built through his people accepting and receiving God's reign and all that it brings.

There is no impersonal manifestation of God's tree on earth.

It is realised in and through those people sharing a certain spiritual DNA from God in God's sphere of influence.

There are two ways you can propagate a tree.

- a) One is by taking a cutting from a growing tip which is what Ezekiel said God would do from the house of David to replant his tree after its collapse.
- b) The other way to propagate a tree is to collect its seed.

Mark 3:26-34

We may now hear Jesus' words about trees spoken to people who lived by sowing seeds.

About 11 to 10 thousand years ago - so we are told - people began to plant crops and practice agriculture. The mystery of the seed and its beautiful power became essential to life.

In the first part of today's Gospel reading Jesus contemplates this mystery:



“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

This is a clear picture of people now actively participating in the mystery of life in creation.

Then from here he offers another parable of the Kingdom of God:



³¹It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

He takes us from the mystery of the seed to the tree providing shelter for the birds.

Application:

So with our minds thinking trees and seeds in tune with the Bible let's consider a bit more Jesus' words about seeds, trees and the Kingdom of God.



It's represented by the bird living under or nesting in the tree enjoying shelter and food.

It's represented by the planted grain seed producing a rich harvest.

It's God's way of providing abundant life.

But there is something new in the way Jesus talks about this compared to Ezekiel and Paul.

- a) Ezekiel is orientated to God's action in geo-politics of his day – big scale vision of God in history.
- b) Paul is getting a church to understand itself as God's field of planting and growing – with implications for local politics.
- c) Jesus focuses on the tree being grown through a seed he brings being at work in the individual - you and me.



Jesus is talking about seed he brings landing in the heart and mysteriously growing there to then be manifested in abundant fruit and becoming 'trees' that shelter and feed others.

What seeds do in the ground is mysterious even after science has explained it.

It's so mysterious it keeps me and many other hobby gardeners fascinated year after year!

It's awesome to see the way a seed can germinate and push its way through hard ground in determination to put up a shoot and reach for the light.

But here is where the mystery comes home to us.

The seed Jesus describes carries the DNA of God's Kingdom and has the power to land in us and take root there. It's like being infected with a holy virus.

When we hear or see something of God and take it in, receive and digest, embrace and hold, the mysterious power of that seed begins to grow and take over. It has the power to transform us and change how we influence the space around us.

The encouragement is that a tiny seed is all it takes. One little seed can lead to great results.

What I hear Jesus saying is that if we take to heart something from him and let it land in us - Boom! Jesus spoke words with this life giving power and if we receive them, they are seeds of the Kingdom that can make us into life-nourishing trees.

In recent weeks I have heard back from some people about what they hear on Sundays. I am delighted when people report a seed experience. It's often a single line or so but it went in and its power grows with attention.

The Philosopher in Ecclesiastes writes: (Ecclesiastes 12:12)

My son, beware ... Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

We are talking about seeds not books.

Whatever happens on Sunday or when you worship with God's Word, be open to receiving a seed.

That seed has power whatever condition you may be in. Receive it and nurture it.

It's the seed, not the soil.

Some of us are not very happy inside. Some have problems others know about and others have silent struggles to live with. We may be 'sad soil'.

Let a Jesus seed land. Take to heart what you hear Jesus say and hold it.

The power is in the seed not in you.

The way this works for me is upon hearing something that addresses me and lands.

A few years ago I was at a conference and heard this verse from First John 4:18

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

That landed in me like a seed bomb. I received and owned it. It became a holy infection. I kept watering it. It has been at work in me.

Before closing there is one logical implication of what I have been saying about seeds you may be encouraged by:

This power of the seed is also part of evangelism.

In working with God as he grows his kingdom we may sow seeds in others, little actions or words that carry the DNA of life in God to another heart. These seeds are power packed but only if they are received and germinate which is beyond our control.

In God's world seeds are mysteriously wonderful and massively inefficient. Next door to me is a silver birch tree that hosts pigeons, crows and many smaller birds too. In late summer it drops its seeds and they are so numerous that most land in places with no chance of germinating. They are like confetti.

But every now and then, a seed finds a place and becomes the tree God enables it to be.

That is the economy of God's creation and of seeds.

That is how it is with sowing seeds of kingdom witness too.

So we may consider ourselves soil in which God sows one good seed at a time.

Amen?