

God's gardening tips

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34

Gardening has never had any particular interest for me, but I am in awe of those who dedicate so much of their time and talent to this pastime. Growing up on a farm, if you couldn't put a plough on it, it was not of much use, not that I did much ploughing either! Travelling up to Perth for a funeral last week, there were a number of fields already ploughed, and I wondered what crops had been sown, or were about to be sown.

I also confess to watching the occasional gardening programme, it's always a pleasure watching someone else working hard in their garden or hearing Monty Don in *Gardeners' World* advising me about all the jobs I should be getting on with in the garden, and not really understanding what he is talking about!

Gardens, and growing, feature regularly in the Bible. From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane to the Garden with the Tomb in the Easter Story, and several in between. So also farming and sowing and all things agricultural. Jesus knew His crowd, and knew they were unlikely to have a sophisticated academic understanding of theology and the message about God's Kingdom and how God would be at work in that time. Jesus told them in parables, short stories that were accessible and spoke at different levels. This is what life is like, the parables say, drawn from a world you understand. But look beyond or beneath the surface meaning and think about what they might say about the bigger issues in life, and about God.

In the parable Jesus tells, this is a story about the mystery of growth, and the way in which God continues to be at work in our world and in our Church. What is immediately striking in this parable about growth is its down-to-earth nature (pun intended). In a peasant, agricultural society this

story speaks into people's everyday experience. A parable may be an 'earthly story with a heavenly meaning' – but we need to hold those two aspects, earth and heaven, together and not to focus on one direction over another.

The truth is this story is speaking about the mystery of the Kingdom of God among us, now. The bringing of Heaven to Earth.

In Jesus' words there is an emphasis on the mystery and surprise of God. We live in an age when the mystery and surprise of life, including God's power, are being squeezed out of our consciousness. We are so used to being in control of our own destiny; we are so accustomed to making our own decisions and being responsible for our own actions; we are even motivated to work hard to make things happen because that is our duty and privilege and even calling as Christian women and men. Jesus says, *sometimes*, we need to keep our imagination open, because there is a dynamic, a vital power that is mysteriously at work for good that will often be beyond our comprehension.¹ We need to be still and know that God is God.

The love and mercy and kindness and provision of God's love will happen with us or without us. We don't control it, we don't understand it, but it happens nonetheless. We have a part to play, but it is not as decisive as we like to think.

Sometimes, no matter how hard we work, no matter what our intentions and plans may be, something different will happen. Self-sowing seeds will take root in places we had not expected, or even wanted. Away from horticulture, I was wryly amused to hear a senior economist commenting on political parties and their election pledges for the economy of our. They could do this, or they could do that, and then, the economist said without a hint of irony, "wait and see if they get lucky"! I often feel that a lot of life is like that: we work away at this or that, and sometimes because of, but often despite of what we do, stuff happens, and we respond to it as best we are able.

Is this an argument to sit back and do nothing, not to expend any time or energy, because whatever we do, stuff is going to happen? Is that what Jesus means when He says in His parable, "The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how." Is there a kind of fatalism at the heart of faith?

Not quite so, I think. The man still had to go and sow the seed, having presumably bought it and looked after it and waited for the right season to sow it. This parable is not the only story about God and God's Kingdom and our part in it. But there is here something quite profound that some of us need to hear.

Not all of the time, but some of the time, particularly if we are tired, or anxious, or guilty, or vulnerable, we over-perform. We want something to happen, maybe even a good thing to happen, and we work and work and work at it, we plan and plot, we worry away at the smallest nuance, making sure that everything, and I mean everything, is planned down to the last detail and nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, is left to chance. Every eventuality covered, every option considered, every outcome forecast. In a meal you are preparing; in a piece of music you are performing; in a talk you are giving; in a garden you are tending; in a report you are writing; in an election you are running; in an interview you are preparing for; in a home you are cleaning; in a party you are organising; in a holiday you are taking.

In a world where control feels like everything, we plan out surprise, we plan out spontaneity. Do we plan out God? Not that we shouldn't work; not that we shouldn't plan; but that sometimes we believe that so much depends on us, and that no-one can quite do what needs to be done in the way that we want it done, that we squeeze out every last bit of pleasure and joy; exhausting ourselves, and others, in the process.

We must work, and work hard at times, of course. But like the sower in the parable, we neither make a crop grow, nor indeed fully understand the mystery of growth. This lesson about the slowness of the growth of the seed of God's word, but also its sureness, is a lesson most of us need to learn. It has been called 'revolutionary patience'. Sometimes it is the task of the disciple of Jesus to sow the seed but then leave to God the growth and the increase.ⁱⁱ God's gardening tips sometimes remind us to let the growth happen of its own accord. Stop poking and prodding and fussing and interfering. Let God get on with it and stay your hand and your need to be in control.

The late Norma Ronald DCS, a former pastoral assistant here, would sit beside me at the communion table after the sermon and before the benediction. At around this time of year she would lean across and whisper about the sermon, "Excellent! Now, when is your next holiday?" She had an annoying but unerring pastoral ability to see the sometimes less than hidden fraying edges of my body and soul and knew that I needed to be doing something else. Or more accurately doing nothing else, because I was tired, fractious, living on fumes, nerves jangling.

God's gardening tips on some occasion is like that. Play your part, but then stop. The outcome of God's kingdom does not solely depend on you. Or, when recovering from an illness or a difficult health condition, or when wading through grief, or when doing a piece of complex work, let things take their own time. Not all of the time but some of the time. Whatever the time the outcome does not depend entirely on us.

In the difficult Old Testament prophetic book of Ezekiel there is that beautiful little passage we heard earlier which shows God, sort of gardening again, taking a tiny, tender cutting from a cedar tree, and planting it. As it grows, like the mustard seed parable Jesus told centuries later, the little cutting develops and matures and puts down roots, and spreads its branches, and provides shade,

and protection, and a home for all the beasts and birds of creation. The growth was God's gift to Creation. Like the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, this seedling was not planted by a human hand but by the Divine hand. Under its protective canopy Creation, and humanity within it, finds rest for a time, before going out into the world and getting on with things.

Might it be for you, for me, that in the great ecology of God, for an hour, or a Sabbath day, or a season, God simply wants us to be still, and know that He is God, and rest in His care, and enjoy the garden of His grace and kindness and love and creation.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Nibs Stroup, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 3, p143*

ⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, *Will you follow Me? p64*