

As we read through the bible there are a number of very powerful images used to illustrate the relationship between God and his people. One that would often come to mind would be that of God as shepherd. Passages such as Psalm 23 would come readily to mind, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing’ and the hymns that we associate with it, ‘The King of love my shepherd is’. Jesus will speak of himself as the Good Shepherd, and many a picture will appear in a Victorian Bible with Jesus bringing home the lost sheep.

There are other, equally powerful images, that would appear in the great prophets and the Gospels. The one that I would want to highlight today would be that of Israel as the vineyard and God as the vinedresser. There is an image of care and nurture, of pruning, of weeding, of feeding the soil. We read of Jesus describing himself as the vine and his followers as the branches. He will speak of pruning, of keeping the plant healthy. There is mention of fruitfulness, of the difference between good fruit and bad fruit, of the sort of fruit you would expect to find on the different trees and bushes.

Now I would suspect that there are more gardeners than there are shepherds around the Parish of Howth. So possibly the image of the vine is going to strike a greater chord with us as we read the different passages in the bible.

So what is it that makes a good gardener? We would often hear it said of someone that he/she has green fingers, that whatever that person plants seems to flourish. As I was thinking around this whole topic, my mind went back to stories I have read over the years by the English author, P. G. Wodehouse. Wodehouse will never rank as one of the giants of English literature, but he has a way of drawing us into his characters. The stories I have in mind centre around Blandings Castle, the ancestral home of Clarence, Earl of Emsworth.. One of the more troublesome relationships he has is with his head gardener, a

formidable Glaswegian by the name of Angus McCalister. McCalister is technically an employee but he is the real master of the gardens of Blandings Castle.. In a rash moment the Earl fires McCalister, who duly heads off to London. Then, in subsequent days, as the Shropshire Agricultural Show approaches and the prospect of coveted prizes diminish, the Earl realises he has made a desperate mistake and he heads off to London to lure McCalister back to Blandings.

The gardener has a real understanding of his garden, of the soil, of the plants, the climate that goes deeper than just head knowledge. He/she has a feel for what is going on. The rest of us can read the books, watch the TV programmes but the expert, the genuine expert brings that something extra, those green fingers.

With that in mind, I turn to the story of the fig tree that just seems to be going nowhere that we read as part of the Gospel appointed for today. The owner of the land looks at the fig tree that has produced nothing for three years and sees a waste of space. The gardener looks at the same fig tree and sees potential, sees the possibility of new growth, sees the possibility of fruitfulness and says, ‘No, let’s give it another chance.’

We worship a God of second chances, a God of new beginnings, a God of hope. One of the threads that is running through our Old Testament Lessons for this season of Lent is that of Covenant. Looked at on one level, the Old Testament is a story of repeated failure, as generation after generation falls short of God’s call, at different stages society falls apart, at different stages they end up in alliances that turn sour, at one stage ending up in exile. As generation after generation knows failure, at the same time, generation after generation experiences an invitation to return as expressed in those beautiful words that we read from Isaiah

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
⁷let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

As I read that, I think also of the words of absolution from the Service of Morning Prayer in the old book, that are drawn from the Book Ezekiel

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live;

That really is what at the heart of my conviction about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: a God who desireth not the death of a sinner but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live. God sees me as I am, in all my strengths and my weaknesses – sees in me maybe something I lose sight of myself at times, an image of himself, the person I was made to be, the person I was called to be. That is at the heart of my understanding of the Incarnation, God coming among us in the person of Jesus Christ – the God of second chances, the God of new beginnings coming among us in the person of Jesus Christ. May God give us grace to respond to his call.

I will just close with a prayer that we would often use to round off our prayers at a funeral service:

**Heavenly Father,
in your Son Jesus Christ
you have given us a true faith and a sure hope.
Strengthen this faith and hope in us all our days,
that we may live as those who believe in the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
and the resurrection to eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**