

On Sundays, the first reading – usually from the Old Testament – generally has the same theme as the gospel; today, that theme is likening the kingdom of heaven to a great tree with many branches. The Responsorial Psalm too, echoes this. It begins in a small way: the Lord, through the prophet Ezekiel, says that he will take a single shoot and plant it on a high mountain, while Jesus compares it to a mustard seed. The tree is an almost universal motif in world mythologies, especially the Indo-European and the North American creation myths. The ‘World Tree’ is represented as colossal, supporting the vault of heaven on its uppermost branches. This tree in Norse mythology is called Yggdrasil: this mighty tree held together the nine worlds of Norse creation myth and connected the Vikings living in this world with the fantastic worlds of the gods and giants. The World Tree is also known as the Tree of Life, which is the source of all wisdom and is said to be the central axis of the globe. In Jewish religion symbolism the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, are both planted in the Garden of Eden. According to ancient Jewish mythology, the Tree of Life in that Garden is also the ‘Tree of Souls’ that blossoms and produces new souls, which fall into the great treasury of souls; the Angel Gabriel reaches in and takes out the first soul that comes into his hand, then Lailah, the Angel of Conception, watches over the embryo until it is born. The Revelation of St John – that strange and fantastic book – mentions the Tree of Life a number of times. And, of course, the Christian mystery begins with a tree (in the Garden of Eden) and ends with a tree (on the Calvary Cross). There is an 18th century Christmas carol that likens Christ to an apple tree:

‘The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compared with Christ the Apple Tree.’

This honours the Saviour's birth. The Passiontide hymn *Vexilla Regis*, sings of the tree upon which he hung:

'O tree of beauty, tree most fair,
ordained those holy limbs to bear;
gone all is shame, each crimsoned bough
proclaims the King of glory now'

And this honours his death.

In the eastern Orthodox tradition, Christ is often depicted in icons as the Tree of Life, seated at the centre of it, while the apostles are shown as the branches that grow out of him.

All this is to say that the tree has been a cultural and religious symbol deep in the collective soul of humanity almost since the beginning; and it carries a countless number of meanings. Here, we note that heaven, eternal life, salvation and the kingdom of God are all represented in one way or another, cross-culturally, by a tree: often gigantic, sometimes bearing golden fruit, the giver of wisdom and knowledge, a shelter for all the birds of the air, the origin and source of life. We also remember again that this tree has small, humble beginnings: no more than a shoot or a seed in today's readings. So it isn't just about the tree as a living symbol, but also the process of its growth. This is important, because when we imagine this tree within ourselves – the inward kingdom – it makes perfect sense that it is something which must be planted, take root and grow. Time and time again Jesus uses parables about sowing seed, a crop sprouting and producing grain. This begins in the earth of our hearts. There is a legend told of a medieval knight who, after many years of service, decided to enter the Cistercian monastery of Citeaux. He wished to lead a life of penance and prayer, but the only prayer he knew was 'Ave Maria' – nothing more than that. So for the rest of his life he silently said prayer in his heart, over and over again, 'Ave Maria'. At length he died and was buried. Many months later,

the monks were astonished to discover a slender tree growing up over his grave: the tree bore white lily-like flowers that gave off a marvellous fragrance. The monks did not know it, but the roots of the tree were deep in the knight's heart. Gandalf famously said to Pippin at the battle of Minas Tirith:

“It doesn't end here. The journey goes on.”

In the same way, the Tree of the Kingdom within us doesn't remain a shoot or a seed – the growing goes on. This growth happens in our everyday life according to how we live. In today's second reading St Paul says:

“For all the truth about us will be brought out into the law court of Christ, and each one of us will get what he deserves for the things he did in the body, good or bad.”

I take his point: for if the soil in our hearts is dry and barren, nothing will grow; but if it is rich and moist, the Tree of the Kingdom will put down its roots and flourish. But I find it unsympathetically put – especially from the man who also said:

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Every day we have the opportunity to nourish our heart's soil with the nutrients it needs: patience with the irritating, time for the tedious, forgiveness for the offensive, a kind word spoken rather than withheld, a smile rather than a sullen stare, loving service – however small – when we are shown that service is needed. There is nothing soft or sentimental about any of this, because these are all such difficult things for most of us to do. They never really come naturally – which is precisely why they feed the roots of the Tree of the Kingdom within us.

The growth always begins hidden, in the dark, beneath the surface of the ground. This how it must inevitably be: Jesus spoke of the treasure buried in field, the pearl of great price; and in today's

gospel he compares this process of growth which – once the seed has been sown – more-or-less takes care of itself. This is important for us, because it tells us that we should never become discouraged: the healing work of the surgeon is done when we are unconscious of it and in the same way, the transforming work of the Spirit goes on even when we are unaware of it – it is hidden from our sight, deep within us. It is better this way. When we feel despondent, weary of battling with the same old sins and failings, when it seems that our efforts are getting us nowhere, when it still takes such an effort to pray and our prayers are always dry... well then, we should remind ourselves that the real work, the real growth of the kingdom-tree in our hearts, the real transformation, is going on way beneath the passing surface flux, far deeper and more authentic level of our soul than all our everyday preoccupations, doubts, anxieties – and deeper, too, than our sense of spiritual impoverishment or failure. In the end, each one of us will be like the green bay tree. As the psalmist says:

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the House of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God.” (92:12)