

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

Today the sun is shining, people have become solar powered, and we can reflect with joy on the abundance that has been Spring. It's quite a journey from the shortest day, and the cold dark days of winter. But even then there is life to celebrate (what is this?). Most plants, however, are hidden under ground, the trees are bare and seemingly lifeless (how cold does this picture look?!). But then – in gardens, in the woods around Richmond, even outside the door of our church, we see a sign of change, a sign of life, a sign of hope (what are these?). What next on Spring's menu (what are these?). Still the trees are bare but one brave plant in our hedgerows takes a risk, whilst it is still cold and all the trees are still bare, and it erupts into life (what is this? Blackthorn / Sloe). Having been shown a lead other plants join in and are let loose (what are these x2, and these x2, and one of the first trees to send out its leaves – there's one down the bottom of the church path). Any ideas what tree this is (Cedar?)? This was in our reading from Ezekiel. And therefore this one (mustard), from our gospel – a tree that defies the desert.

Think of all those seeds sleeping around us for such a long time, in the dark months, waiting for the right moment to Spring up and flourish. Think of the larvae in the ground and in the river that now buzz around us and sometimes annoy. Think of the caterpillars that are yet to become butterflies, think of plants still waiting for their turn to bloom, think of the snowdrop bulbs safely back into the ground, sleeping, ready and waiting for next Spring. The cycle of life, the rhythm of life, the abundance of life; all, we believe, fully in tune with our creator God, all in harmony with our abundant God.

(Cedar) Ezekiel says that God has taken a tender sprig right from the top of the mighty Cedar. God will plant this *tiny* fragile cutting in Israel and it will become mighty and strong, its leaves and branches giving home and protection to every kind of bird. He will bring down the mighty, the humble will be lifted up, and *all* of us find sanctuary in its boughs.

Jesus says (in our reading from Mark), the kingdom of God is like the tiny mustard seed. From this small seed comes great growth and branches so that birds of the air can make nests in its shade. How small is small? (VISUALISOR).

We are made in the image of God. We worship God. We are part of the kingdom of God. I suspect most of us sometimes feel small and insignificant. Tiny and fragile. What a wonderful picture, then: however small we are we can be part of the rhythm of life, in tune with our God, and part of the abundant gift of God's Kingdom to the world. And *all* are welcome to this Kingdom of God.

This is good and is true, but comes with a danger. We are a church and we are in a world that hardly feels to be flourishing. If only I had *enough* faith then I could heal the sick, *just like the disciples*. If I had enough faith *then I could move mountains*. I could walk on water, I could calm the storms (that's next week, with Paul!). We could clothe the naked, feed the hungry, fill the church, get rid of Covid. So when we don't and when can't then once again we feel small, inadequate, we feel there's something wrong with our faith. We are the ones remaining frozen in the ground, forever waiting for Spring; the Kingdom of God surely belongs to others.

If and when we are weeping with self-loathing then seeing others thrive can make one feel worse, even the abundance in nature which should bring great joy can instead bring a sense of aching.

Such doubt is no bad thing, it is *infinitely better* than righteous self-confidence. Jesus condemned the self-righteous and religious of his day, those who seemed to understand more than most that *they* were made in the image of god. Jesus had more time for the fishermen, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the humble, the meek, and for those of *us* with a broken and contrite heart. He will not despise, he will love because he is love.

When, in satisfying love, he opens his arms for *us* upon the tree we then find a wideness in God's mercy. The kingdom of God is indeed like the mighty cedar or rugged mustard tree and we find shelter in its branches.

What then is our response? For our final hymn (which we sing together outside) Clare has chosen 'O Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end, we pray for grace to follow our master and our friend'. There may be periods in our lives when we are tall and strong like a mighty tree holding others in our care. There may be times when we are a small and fragile snowdrop in the snow, but both are beautiful, both seek the light of Christ, and both are held within the abundant love of God.