

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 17th June 2018**  
*Ezekiel 17: 22 - 24; Mark 4: 26 - 34*

On Tuesday of this coming week my nephew turns eighteen, and this summer he leaves school. How did that happen? It was just yesterday that I visited my brother in Aberdeen and held his tiny newborn son in my arms. It seemed ridiculous at the time that my wee brother was a father, and it seems ridiculous now that this wee baby is now a gangly 6 foot two, and if he spreads his arms out he has an arm span as broad as the branches of one of those cedar trees that the prophet Ezekiel was talking about in the Old Testament reading this morning.

As an aside, if you have never seen a Lebanese cedar tree, there's one in the Botanic Gardens here in Edinburgh. Go and find it. Cedar's are magnificent trees, and if you stand and look at it and imagine a whole mountainside covered in these trees then many of the metaphors using cedars in the Old Testament stories come alive before your eyes.

How did it happen, though, that my nephew got so big and so old so quickly? Of course, I know literally how it happened, or at least the 21st century human race knows how people grow. I'm not asking literally, how did he get so big and so old, I'm asking wondrously. No matter how much biology any of us understands, it is difficult for anyone, nor least parents of newborns, not to be at least a little overwhelmed by the wonder of life and growth and change and time all mixed together being shaped and reshaped, formed and reformed before our very eyes. It is wondrous; it is unbelievable.

It is not just people. In the 21st century we know literally also how seeds grow, but when Jesus told a story comparing the Kingdom of God to a man scattering seeds on the land and then professing wonder at their growth, the story doesn't become redundant now that we live in the 21st century when we know the science behind the growth of seeds. Like a baby growing up, the Kingdom of God, Jesus wants you to believe, is a powerful thing that wondrously takes shape before your very eyes. Like a baby growing up, all you did was plant a seed; and now look what's happened!

How did that happen? How indeed? One of the questions that haunts all parents, especially new parents, not to mention farmers trying to get the best yield from their crop, is to what extent is this process of life, growth, change purely a natural thing that we have little control over, and to what extent is it a nurture thing that we can influence and to some extent control. Did my nephew get to be 6' 2" because his genes did it, or was it the spinach my brother fed him?

I'm sure that Kirsten and Craig, like all parents, are sure that the choices they make about how they bring Will and Elis up, including the choice to come here this morning and rejoice in thanksgiving at Will's birth, will make a difference to who and what their children grow up to be and to become. There is of course scientific evidence to show that this is the case, but even without that science we know, we

believe, that what we do, how we relate to children, the choices we make about their upbringing makes a difference to their lives; nurture matters.

But, that is also a haunting belief. If the choices we make, make a difference, how do we know we are making the right choices? In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Dr Frankenstein thought he was intervening in nature in a good way, a way that he believed would benefit the world. He planted a seed, scientifically, and nurtured it, and then look what happened.

Mark, the Gospel writer, relates earlier in his Gospel a similar story about seed that a man sowed but that didn't grow as expected. Some fell on good soil and the yield was enormous, but equally some fell on the footpath, some fell on stony ground, some fell amongst thistles, and the yield was poor. It can be haunting to believe that nurture matters because if our interventions matter much, while that might be heart-warming when we make the right decisions, how many times have I felt that I have done the wrong thing, said the wrong thing, not done something that I should have done: if I believe the cuddle and the laughter makes a positive difference, what does that say about the anger and the rows?

Because we don't fully know the balance between nature and nurture, and because we can't really trust fully the affect and the extent that our interventions make, Jesus capped his stories about seed falling on the ground and growing with a story about a mustard seed. We read it this morning. Whereas in the other stories he only mentions seed in general, in this story he very specifically chose a mustard seed. That is odd, because in real life, in biological, scientific life a mustard seed does not grow in to the sort of tree Jesus describes, a plant taller than any other with branches so large that the birds can settle in its shade.

If you want that sort of plant then you really need to take a clipping from a Lebanese Cedar tree, as Ezekiel described doing, in order to grow a tree under which everyone can shelter. The mustard tree in the Middle East can grow big, 25 feet sometimes, and wide under which there is much shade, but it is nothing compared to the Lebanese Cedar described by Ezekiel, and which in the words Jesus uses Jesus reminds people about.

Jesus chose the mustard seed as his metaphor for this story because in doing so the mustard seed emphasises the wonder of what can be achieved, the unbelievable thing or feeling that we experience when we see life and growth and time come together to shape and form something magical before our very eyes. The mustard seed is also chosen to emphasise the tiny size of seed: big things happen from even our smallest, most insignificant interventions. The Kingdom of God is like this tiny mustard seed that produces wondrous, unbelievable, magical growth.

In Jesus' ministry and life the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom characterised by love, by peace, by justice and by mercy. These things, love, peace, justice, mercy, when they are practised nurture, shape and form and grow the Kingdom of God.

You may think that in the grand scheme of things you are a small, insignificant part of this world, this society, this community, this church, this family, this friendship; you may think that. And you may be unsure, uncertain whether the interventions you make, the choices you make, the decisions you take in this world have any meaning or significance.

You might think or feel that, but Jesus wants you to believe, to believe, that when you - whoever you are - sow seeds, however small: of love; when you practice peace, when you stand up for justice; and when you temper your justice, or your anger, or your vengeance with mercy. In other words, when you live as if the Kingdom of God reigns now, lovingly, peacefully, justly, mercifully, then believe that you, whoever you are, and whatever it is that you do, make a difference in the lives of others: of your children; of friends; of your family. And that difference wondrously, unbelievably can in their lives grow in to something as magnificent as a fully-grown Lebanese Cedar.

Sometime this summer take a trip down to Inverleith and find the Cedar tree in the Botanic Garden. It is beautiful and magnificent, and what's more you could grow that tree, in your life, in your family, in your community, in your church, in your society, in your country, in your world, in God's kingdom. Unbelievable.