

# The Mustard Tree

I want to share with you, some images around the story of the Mustard Tree. Images that will reveal a nurturing and enveloping nature of the tree. Images that will reveal the creative work of God and the part we have to play in that.

I want then to paint a sacred canvas of our commissioning for servanthship in the world, and the absolute relevance of that to our foundational call to faith.

Because we describe ourselves as a people of faith, it follows that should a weary traveller come into our midst, that should be for them, akin to finding an oasis in a parched desert.

## **Enfolding and inclusion.**

As a nineteen year old, I made the momentous decision to leave home. I caught a train from Hamilton to Wellington and began an adventure like nothing I had ever known before.

Unfortunately, and despite careful plans, my first lodging place turned into a disaster and eventually I found myself at the Wellington City Mission, looking for lodgings. It was frightening and I felt very much alone.

The assistant missionary of the time, Fr Beech, eventually offered me a room in the Feilding Taylor Hostel, but there was a catch; If you wanted breakfast on Sunday morning, you had to attend mass in the mission Chapel, St Martin's.

Rather than this becoming a sense of obligation a new door opened and I found myself being totally wrapped in a loving blanket. For the

first time in a very long time, I felt as if I belonged. It was for me a home-coming. I took to it like a duck to water. It was a faith community, but it became my family.

### **The nature of a call to faith**

1. one of the things that you will have heard me talk of constantly, is that at the very heart of our faith lay two fundamental issues.
2. When I talked a moment ago of "being totally wrapped in a loving blanket", that sense of reconciliation was total. I felt at one with God and I felt at one with my fellow pilgrims.

As I say these things I am reminded of the writings of Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton was an American Trappist monk, writer, theologian, mystic, poet, social activist, and scholar of comparative religion. On May 26, 1949, he was ordained to the priesthood and given the name "Father Louis".

A key event in Merton's life took place not in the silence of the cloister but on a bustling street corner in the middle of a city. Like all Trappists, Merton rarely left the abbey, but on one occasion he had a good reason to venture into the world. Such an errand brought him to downtown Louisville, Kentucky, in March 1958, when he had been a monk for well over sixteen years. On that late winter's day as he reached a street corner, something amazing happened;

*"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people," wrote Merton, referring to the passers by on the street. "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness."*

In other words, Merton suddenly realized that there was no real difference between being a monk (who was celibate and lived in a silent monastery) and being a "normal" person. He marvelled over this apparently simple insight, "if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun<sup>1</sup>

Here is another insight to ponder as we share this pilgrimage.

We live in a world inhabited by billions of people. We live in a world that has a history reaching back countless millions of years. Many more people have come and gone than we can possibly conceive of and yet here today, in this minuscule cross-section of history, we have been brought together to share in worship. Out of all the billions of possible moments in time, here we are together this morning. This is a moment in time that will be gone almost as soon as it has come, yet here we are. To echo the language of Marcus Aurelius, the big question is, "how will we make the best of this time we have together?". To invert his question, you could ask; "what will happen to this opportunity in time, if we do not grasp it with a loving embrace?" "Where will it go if we do not seize the moment?"

### **Understanding the Metaphor**

Now let me connect the dots and ground these thoughts in scripture. Our Gospel for today is the parable of the mustard seed. The image we are given is that of a large tree that grown from a very small seed.

Popular commentary will emphasise the grown of vibrant faith from a tiny start. There are however, other images to see in this parable.

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<sup>1</sup> MCCOLMAN, C., *Befriending Silence: Discovering the Gifts of Cistercian Spirituality* (Notre Dame, IN 2015) 14.

A persistent biblical image is that of the wilderness. Most of the Old Testament Prophets talk of enabling a straight path through the wilderness on a return to gathered-ness. John Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness. Jesus went out into the wilderness to begin his ministry.<sup>2</sup>

Picture an North African wilderness scene where scattered about in an otherwise challenging environment, there are the mustard trees. In a recent wild-life documentary, I was astonished at the diversity of life being sheltered by the tree. It nested birds. I housed Bees. It shaded wild animals. It was a refuge offering shelter to those who desperately needed it.

Can you now embrace that image and let it become a metaphor? Can you let that metaphor transform itself into something much more? Can you glimpse this place; this congregation; as a place of refuge and shelter? Can you see yourselves as the branches of the tree; tenderly nestling nesting spots for those who need help. Can you help guide the way for the lost and the lonely as they reach out towards God who lies at heart of our together-ness?

And if you feel refreshed by this warmth and love, do you now have strength to venture out into the wilderness to find others in need of shelter?

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<sup>2</sup> See for example; Isaiah 40:3-5, "A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

## **Commissioning**

Very shortly, we will move from this time of worship, to an act of commemoration. We will share in the breaking of the bread. Having echoed the ministry of Jesus among the poor and disadvantaged we will next be drawn into an act of affirming our one-ness in Christ and with each other. The concrete-ness of our ministry will offered up in a symbolic way.

Before we make this journey however, let's be clear about what it is we are tasked to do. Let's be clear about why we should be called, and if indeed called; what is the nature of our divine task?

The focus of our conversation this morning is the Mustard Tree. Not so much in relation to it's exponential growth, but rather, the metaphor of envelopment; of nurturing shelter; of shade from a hostile environment.

If however this image is limited to the doors of this chapel, then what on earth are we saying about the other six days of the week? This question challenges us to consider the reality that the metaphor of the Mustard Tree is not just a Sunday construction. It is about a way of life. It is about a way of life that seeks to recognise that the fundamental actions of our faith are to love God and love each other. We are to live the metaphor of the Mustard Tree.

In assenting to our core creeds, we are also committing to a servant relationship with all the people of our neighbourhood and even beyond. Ministry is not an entitlement, it is a calling to the tasks of servanthship in Christ's name.

Merton's vision of an abiding love for people, far beyond the walls of his Monastery, is ours as well

## Being the Body of Christ

What we are doing here this morning as we move from worship to commemoration, is being commissioned for service among all those we will encounter, far beyond the cloisters of this church building. We are saying yes to a role in the creative unfolding of Creation. By sharing in the breaking of the bread, we are moving from adoration to action. In the celebration of this sacred meal, we will in effect all have our feet under the table. Our participation should defuse the false understandings of an abstract rite. Indeed, our celebration is a stunning 'public' liturgy in which we humans are made members of God's very Body. (John 6:57) 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me'.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine put it another way by paraphrasing it and saying: "I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me."

In a similar way, while preaching on the sacraments in the year 445, Pope Leo the Great said, "What was visible in our Saviour has passed over into His mysteries." By entering into this sacred mystery, we all, actually become an expression of it. We are commissioned to be a people through whom God's love may flow into the lives of others, not just within the shelter of this place, but in the entirety of our environment.

If the metaphor of the Mustard Tree has stirred your imagination and left you awakened to a new understanding of ministry; If you have sensed the enveloping love and shelter of Mustard Tree, then

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<sup>3</sup>

One needs to exercise caution here. Just because one takes part in the celebration of Eucharist and receives the host, does not automatically mean that one is transformed into the new Adam. The Doctrine of Justification is complex and worthy of meaningful study. The person Justified by Faith is not just someone who has dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's. Serious enquiry will lead the enquirer into a state of being fully immersed in the life of Christ.

the next the step is commissioning for service in the breaking of the bread. As you become the very body of Christ, then surging within you is new life in Christ. You will be at one with God and at one with your fellow pilgrim.

The journey ahead is fraught with challenges, but we must prevail. Do not be afraid. As Paul reminds us in today's epistle;

*26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

As we engage the task of being saints in servant action we are not alone. If we have the courage to listen, God will act into our lives and inspire our acts of service. We will be empowered to share our faith, not by haranguing weary travellers, but by mirroring the love we share as fellow pilgrims. This is a divine task of momentous proportions. This is not something achieved by 'saying the right things' but rather by being 'a right person'. We need to echo Isaiah's response; "Here I am. Send me"

As a form of Liturgical commitment, I want to invite you to join in the following Celtic prayer. Your response to each verse I offer, is "I Give myself to you."

I give myself to you Lord  
**I give myself to you**

With my mind and its thinking  
**I give myself to you**

With my hands and their working  
**I give myself to you**

With my eyes and their seeing  
**I give myself to you**

With my body and its actions  
**I give myself to you**

With my heart and its loving  
**I give myself to you**

I give myself to you Lord  
**I give myself to you**

Amen.

Ross

St James the Apostle, 2020 +1