

A seed is an extraordinary thing. From this apparently lifeless little thing that can remain dry and dormant for months or even years, can spring forth remarkable new life – a flowering plant, a vegetable plant yielding many times what is sown, a bushy shrub or a towering tree.

But despite the seemingly endless possibilities that lie in the idea of a single seed, we know that what grows is true to the seed from which it comes: you don't plant pumpkin seeds to obtain an oak tree, you don't plant acorns expecting to yield a crop of pumpkins.

Garden imagery is often used in the Bible, going right back to Genesis and the picture of perfection in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah 55 springs from that seed of imagery, and talks of the coming of a time of new flourishing.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.<sup>1</sup>

Israel was a subsistence agricultural economy, where the amount of annual precipitation could mean the difference between life and death. This image of watering and the resultant flourishing, is a profound picture of God's work which would have brought great hope to the citizens of Jerusalem and Judea languishing in exile in Babylon.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55:10-11

Isaiah expresses the promise of return, a return from exile that will be met with rejoicing. In the vision Israel goes out from exile and is led forward in the journey back to their homeland:

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,  
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.<sup>2</sup>

This vivid picture language highlights the joy that would accompany a return from the hardship and depression of exile. But it's worth noting too that many scriptures suggest that, as well as humankind, the rest of creation has its own relationship with God – so that the mountains and trees might well be interested in, *invested in*, the activity of God among humankind.

There are deep echoes here of the Creation and Fall narratives of the first few chapters of Genesis. Genesis begins with the word of God: God speaking creation into being. Here in Isaiah the vision reminds the exiles that God's word is powerful and effective, it accomplishes its purposes. The echo suggests that God is going to speak something new into being: a return from exile would be, for those held in Bablyon, a new creation.

One of the products of the Fall – humankind's rebellion – is brokenness in creation, a loss of its natural productivity and provision of what is good for humankind. We read in Genesis 3 that God says to Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.  
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken;  
for dust you are and to dust you will return.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 55:12

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:17-19

And now in Isaiah in the echo of these Genesis verses, the exiles are promised that God's word will bring about a reversal: a renewed earth which will once again

bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper,  
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.<sup>4</sup>

In the Garden of God, where juniper and myrtle were meant to grow, thorns and briars had become the unwelcome products of rebellion. The vision given through Isaiah is that the garden will grow and flourish again, true to what the Sower originally intended.

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Over recent weeks we have worked our way through chapter 15 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It is a chapter all about resurrection. Based on the Christian conviction that Jesus Christ had been raised to renewed life after a time of death, Paul was able to assert that this is the realistic future for all the faithful. And in verse 20 of 1 Corinthians 15 he uses a harvest metaphor to express this, writing emphatically

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The festival of the firstfruits was a harvest festival, taking place at the beginning of the wheat harvest. The offering of the firstfruits to God in thanksgiving was a reflection of trust that God would bring about the successful completion of the harvest.

When Paul describes the risen Christ as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" in death, the point he is making is that Jesus is the first to be raised from death, and is the first of many many more. In Jesus we see the example of what, through him, is going to be possible for us all. Our Christian hope is for a bodily resurrection.

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 55:12-13

And again this promise of life in the age to come is not limited to humankind. It has significance for the whole of creation. Romans 8 speaks of creation now being subjected to futility, but then being set free from its bondage to corruption, obtaining the glorious freedom of the children of God. Revelation 21 says that, in the coming of the new heaven and the new earth, God will make all things new.

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Along the way of his 1 Corinthians 15 argument, Paul has had to address the question of what resurrection will look like. And here he turns to garden metaphors:

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. ...

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.<sup>5</sup>

We run into a language difficulty here, because of the words translated “natural” and “spiritual”. We tend to think that Paul is making a distinction between the physical object we call a “body” and a “spirit” of some kind, something insubstantial, something that cannot be touched, a ghost perhaps. But what Paul is in fact talking about is not about the outer form, but rather what animates it. The designation *spiritual* body is used in the same way as we would describe “spiritual gifts”. The present body is animated by the normal life which all humans share. But the body we are to be given at our

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44a

resurrection is to be animated by God's own Spirit. And, Paul affirms, it will be no longer subject to decay and death.

And in this way, we come back to the picture of something growing true to its seed. For when, at the resurrection of the faithful, we are all given new bodies, humanity will become the very thing we were intended for in the first place. Created in the image of God, at the resurrection of the faithful we will at last be fully true to that image.

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Paul concludes his great resurrection discourse in this way:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst it is God who builds his kingdom, we are called to be builders *for* the kingdom, confident that what good we do now will not be destroyed, but will be gathered up into God's new creation.

And as we think about how we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, the question of being true to what is planted appears again. Jesus said,

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars.<sup>7</sup>

There is to be about us a fundamental integrity: our daily lives, our practical living, should reflect the truth that we are drawn into God's new creation work. Jesus has been talking about authenticity: authentic love, authentic teaching, authentic witness and service. To be a true follower of Christ must be something that involves the whole of our beings. We cannot pay lip-service to it, because ultimately that will be found out. Our fruit – in actions and words –

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:58

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:43

will, over time, reveal the true disposition of the heart, our inner life, our real thoughts and feelings.

Today as we give thanks for harvest, for God's provision for our daily needs, may our harvest thanksgiving and harvest offering symbolize our willingness to have God's renewing, recreating word take root in our hearts; may we be participants in spreading the seed of his word abroad; and in the midst of the spiritual famine which holds the world today in its grip, may we be working in anticipation of the time when God brings in the full harvest of which Christ is the firstfruits.

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