

Time takes time.

I begin with the closing words of Psalm 92:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
showing that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

The reading from the Gospel of Mark today is so well known, that sometimes it is difficult to find something new to say, so I hope a few challenging streaks will appear in the next few minutes.

One of the clues available is the reference to trees: in the psalm quoted above, and in the reading. The more I read these parables, the more I felt confronted by a sense of purpose, and what to do in life, and how to do it. And to that I added the sense of time, not as the accumulation of minutes, but rather time as the *perception* of how long it lasts, that is where the title of this Reflection comes from. It is said, though I wonder if it is true, that Einstein tried to explain his theory of the relativity of time with clear example: “a minute lasts 60 seconds, but the perception of those 60 seconds is different when you spend it in the arms of a loved one, or if you have been placed on a burning fire. One seems to not last at all, the other seems to last for ever.”

How long then between a seed being planted and the tree, or the crop emerging in all their glory? Different seeds have different times, and it would never be fair to expect that all happen in the same moment, this is also true of our development as human beings. So, the first story Jesus tells is about a person scattering seeds, and then giving up any control whatsoever on what will come; the person can sleep and has to wait to see what follows: Time is out of our hands, is not up to us to decide what happens and how it happens, or when it happens; and the seeds come up bit by bit, and finally become the harvest.

The second story Jesus tells, is about the mustard seed that is planted, again it grows in its own time, with no intervention of the person who put the seed in the ground, the tree has its own rhythm, and it finally becomes a welcoming place for the birds. And that there is the crucial twist of this parable - ***A tree is a tree for things that are not trees*** - it is for the birds, in this example; not for other trees, neither for the one who planted the seed.

So, what does all this have to say to us? They are both parables about the Kingdom, where we do our part, but we aren't in control of what follows. And that is tough. How do we respond to this letting go? How do we feel about the tree that grows (i.e. the Kingdom) and will let the birds come and take refuge? Shouldn't it be for those who planted it to enjoy the shade and refuge? And if you find this too closely related to what is going on in the world currently, well

– the truth is, the Bible does speak to our realities, and challenges us to respond in light of what the Bible points out. This is our growth in faith.

The truth of the matter is that time belongs to God, not to us. But we live in a world which is currently dictated by, among other things, a sense of immediacy, all must happen **NOW**. And in God's plans things will develop because God is God of time: *a thousand years are like a day*, says the psalmist, which is fine for God but not for us humans. We can't stop the seed growing, we can't hurry the seed growing, it will become a harvest, we can't stop the tree growing and providing refuge for the birds. Of course, we could cut the tree down because we do not want the birds using it, but then that is sort of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Our short sightedness in this area has produced a world environmental crisis.

We are called to be part of what God is doing, but we do have to learn to let God be the one who is in control, and it is God who let us get on with what we have been asked to do. Because time does take time, and no matter how much we push, it has its own rhythm, and we must also bear in mind that we do have to do what is expected of us: celebrate God's presence, live in respect of Creation, love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to speak truth to power, to proclaim the love of God as seen in Jesus, crucified by the powers of the time, and risen by God to show us the plan of God. We must be open to the way the Spirit works in us and others. We must remember we can sit in the shade of the tree, we can eat the produce of the harvest – but not at the expense of others – the birds rest in the branches. We must live in a way that proclaims that ***a tree is a tree for things that are not trees.***

Let me finish with another quote, attributed to the reformer Martin Luther, though I am not 100% sure it came from him, it doesn't matter: *“Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”*

So, where are we on this journey of life? Are we planting trees for the birds to find refuge or are we felling the trees because we do not want others to rejoice in them? Are we demanding an immediate NOW, or are allowing time to take time?

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
Amen*