

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a nineteenth century English poet, was also a considerable artist. One day an elderly man asked him if he would come and view some drawings he had done and tell him what he thought of them. Being kind-hearted, Rossetti at once agreed, but when the art work was put on display before him he could see that it had no real artistic merit. Reluctantly, he had to tell the old man that the pictures were of little value. The man's reaction seemed to show that he wasn't too surprised by the judgement, but he asked Rossetti if he would be so kind as to take a look at two or three other pictures before he went. They were, he explained, the work of a young man and it would be good to get Rossetti's assessment of them. "Oh, yes," he said "these are very good, fine, full of promise. Tell me, who is this young artist; is it by any chance your son?" The old man shook his head. "No," he said, "it's me; I did them forty years ago. And if only someone had given me that kind of encouragement, I'd never have lost heart and given up".

Whether we're young or old, we stand in need of encouragement. And that is especially true of our spiritual life; in our efforts to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, it's easy to get discouraged, to feel that we are making little or no progress. At times we wonder whether we might even be going into reverse.

If that's how we feel, today's readings could serve as a spiritual pick-me-up. The prophet Ezekiel, who gave us our first reading, lived at one of the most disastrous periods of Israel's history, when its people had been hauled off into exile far away from their homeland and many were feeling that God had abandoned them. Ezekiel assures them that this is not so. On the contrary, the Lord has a plan for his people; he will pluck them up, like taking a tiny twig from a branch, and transplant them so that they will grow into a vast tree. That magnificent tree, though Ezekiel himself could not have known it, stands ultimately as a symbol of the kingdom of God.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells a parable, a story with a message not unlike that of Ezekiel. He speaks of a tiny mustard seed, which grows so huge that it provides a resting place for all the birds of the air. And he tells us that the kingdom of God is like that. Despite its tiny beginnings – from one virtually

unknown young man who died by crucifixion – it has not only survived over two thousand years of history but still holds in its embrace millions of people throughout the world. And we are reminded that nothing can ultimately thwart God's plans.

While this parable gives us the big picture of God at work, Jesus tells another parable, which might be described as God's work in miniature. God works not only on the grand scale, not only in nations and among nations, but also on the small scale, in the lives of individuals. And so Jesus tells the story of a farmer who sows his seed and then, until the harvest arrives, must patiently wait. All he knows is that secretly, night and day, the seed is growing, always growing, though he doesn't know how; one day it will produce the blade, then the ear and finally the full grain of wheat.

In our lives, too, the Lord has sown his seed and is permanently at work within us; but, as St Paul explains, for the moment we do not see it, for we live by faith, not by sight. And while we are called to co-operate, the work of salvation is God's achievement, not ours. In fact God is longing for us to grow in faith and hope and love, in freedom and goodness, more than we do ourselves. That is why the psalmist can speak of believers who have grown old still continuing to flourish, "still full of sap, still green". That is why Paul can proclaim, "We are always full of confidence." And that is why we, far from losing heart, can humbly look forward to the day when the Lord comes; for then he will reveal the harvest that has been achieved in us.