

'Ups and Downs'



Hasn't 'time' played peculiar tricks on us this memorable year! We are now enjoying (enduring?) the languorous heat of a steamy August – those 'lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer' to quote the lyrics of Nat King Cole. Throughout the isolation of lockdown, I've made a point of savouring the passing of the seasons, along with their subsequent 'ups and downs'.

One particular 'downer' was the discovery that my constant blackbird companion since early spring, who'd made his nest in my hedge, had been predated in a grotesque way by the local sparrowhawk, who kindly left me and his mate just his beak! Such is nature. I wouldn't have the stomach to be a wild-life photographer having to adopt a strict code of non- interference in such a scenario.

I became aware of the sparrowhawk's tactics as I wandered around the garden enjoying the cool of the early morning. S/he perches on the wire adjacent to the road, surveying the feeding opportunities, then swoops on his/her unsuspecting prey who has so far felt secure in his feeding spot, then ravages the poor creature who, hopefully, didn't know what had hit him.

Reflecting on this upsetting incident, I realized that the Covid 19 virus displays similar opportunistic behaviour: it stalks our communities, waiting for us to let our guard down, then strikes in a seemingly random way and we are back to 'square one'. One thing is becoming apparent – we are in this for the long-term (another major 'downer').

Conversely, there have been 'up's': for once my garden is not bereft of flowers as it usually is by the time August arrives. In parts, it resembles Monty Don's much admired 'jewel' garden, with its profusion of colourful dahlias. Harvest time is upon us, with the pleasurable task of picking and preparing the fruit and veg for storage (along with eating it of course!) There is something immensely satisfying about reaping the results of one's hard labour, particularly if the produce was grown from seed. This whole process involves many 'ups' and 'downs' – The tomatoes are a success (out comes the 'glut' recipes), but the courgettes didn't like the idea of being planted in the old bath! Ah well, you can't win 'em all.

Jesus used the natural world, particularly his listeners' familiarity with the planting and harvesting cycle, to illustrate his teaching. There's nothing like using peoples' everyday experiences to drive a point home. This imagery is used to good effect when Jesus wishes to build a picture of the nature of the Kingdom of God.

Here are some Bible references you might like to look up:

Matthew 13:1-9 Parable of the Sower (also Mark 4: 1-20, Luke 8: 1-15)

Luke 6: 43,44 Fig tree – good/bad fruit

Luke 12: 22-31 Lilies of the field

Luke 13: 18-20 Parables of the mustard seed and the yeast

Matthew 13: 24-43 Parable of the Weeds

Matthew 20: 1-16 Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 21: 18-22 The Fig Tree

Jesus also refers to Harvest Time as the culmination of all the hard work that has gone into producing the – well – produce:

***(Jesus said) “open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”
(John 4: 35)***

Then (Jesus) said to his disciples, “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”. (Matt 9:37)

It is highly unlikely that I would have reaped such a prolific crop of tomatoes if I had relied on a few stray seeds chucked on the compost heap last year, to plant themselves (though I have to admit this did happen to a stray compost heap bean seed last year!) To reap the rewards of knowing Jesus and the Kingdom of God, effort is required, both as a disciple and a ‘discipler’ of others. I have seen and enjoyed the results of my plant-growing efforts, but the time scale is not as fixed within the context of planting the ‘faith’ seed – hence the ‘stepping out in faith’, not knowing if the seeds we plant will ever come to fruition, and if they do, whether we will be around to witness it! No matter – this is what we are instructed to do with the talents at our disposal. Just as ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’, so we are building on 2,000 years + worth of Christian discipleship, and that is worth remembering when we get impatient or down-hearted.

As the celebration of the gathering of the harvest approaches, (where has the time gone?!), now is a good time to gather our thoughts to think creatively about how we can celebrate this abundance of God’s provision, individually and communally.

Generous and life-giving God, we pray that the faith seeds we plant may be fruitful. We ask that you will provide workers for the field, and that we may find creative ways to spread your much-needed word within the current restricted environment in which we find ourselves. We ask this in the precious name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.