

We naturally carry around images in our heads, ways to think about big things. Cities have images like “The City on the Hill,” or “The Big Apple,” “Tinsel Town,” or “Most powerful capital in the world.” Teams have mascots. Dioceses have patron saints—you cannot visit Venice without seeing images of a Lion—it’s St. Mark’s icon, he is the patron of that famous port. Today people debate about the image of the United States; are we the world’s policemen, are we an empire, or are we, some suggest, even a dying empire?

The first reading from Ezekiel gives us a much-used image from ancient Israel. Trees and vines were often used as images of leadership. Isaiah sung of Israel as God’s vineyard. Ezekiel is talking about flawed leadership, how God will pluck out one plant and put in another—from the shoot of a tree a new, abundant, tree will flower. The image, then, is about judgment—how God expects certain things in accord with his love. God will wither up the green tree that is wrong, but give life to the brown one that is faithful.

Paul, in the second reading, explicitly brings up judgment. It can make us cringe. Every one of us must give an account of our lives, receiving what we deserve, in accord with the good or evil we have done. These words make our brains freeze. Do I want God looking over my life? Do I want anyone looking over my life? We believe in privacy! No one has a right to know our secret thoughts and hidden sins, we say.

So here is where the Gospel helps us. It uses part of the imagery for the first reading, but it also helps us know what our judgment will be about. Jesus compares the life of his disciples, of his Church, to images of plants. One image shows how imperceptibly faith grows, from person to person. We just have to look into our own hearts to see how faith has grown in us. Often when we least expect it. The other image is the mustard seed—how small it is, but how it grows to be a plant that gives shelter and sustenance to all. This is what Jesus wants his kingdom to be like—flowering in such a way that “all the birds of the air can come and find shade.”

Judgment will surely be about our sins, but it will be mostly about the way we helped God’s people flower, to be a haven for all those who seek refuge, a home for all those who want to draw close to God, a hand for all those who need help. Our faith is not just for us; it’s for others, and for the world, because faith is a dimension of love.

When people are in love they sing. Psalms are songs.

The author of the Ninety-second Psalm is a person who loves the church. Never is he happier than when he worships within her walls. It has been so with him all his life. Now, however, he has an additional reason for loving her. He has been on a sick bed where gloating enemies have taunted him. But God has confounded them and restored him to health. And that is not all; the Lord has called the singer’s hecklers to strict account for their actions

Special Moments with God

How good it is, the psalmist declares, to be able to worship again in the sacred precincts on the Sabbath! For these are special moments in which spirit with Spirit can meet. Thus, the psalmist will gratefully seek the Lord in the beauty of holiness, rejoicing in the divine presence day and night.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,  
to sing praise to your name, Most High,<sup>a</sup>  
3To proclaim your love at daybreak,

your faithfulness in the night,  
4With the ten-stringed harp,  
with melody upon the lyre.<sup>b</sup>  
5For you make me jubilant, LORD, by your deeds;  
at the works of your hands I shout for joy.

To be sure, the Almighty's ways are past understanding. But their intent is clear. And, because the singer knows this, he can trust the Lord for what lies ahead, confident that God wills only the best for those who believe. So he can bow before the Eternal in reliant adoration. Others might be struggling to find or to hold a faith, since their concern for worldly things has dulled their spiritual acumen. For the psalmist there is no such battle with doubt (Psalm 92:4, 5).

Neither is the psalmist disturbed over an issue that vexes a goodly number of his neighbors. Evildoers, they complain, flourish while the just suffer. Thus, they spend their days grumbling in discontent. Not so, the poet. Instead, like another of Israel's sweet singers, he is convinced that "the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Psalm 19:9). And that being the case, he is confident that the scales will balance. God will scatter the wicked to the winds, he declares, and watch them perish. For he will never permit evil to attain the final victory (Psalm 92:9).

6How great are your works, LORD!<sup>c</sup>  
How profound your designs!  
7A senseless person cannot know this;  
a fool cannot comprehend.  
8Though the wicked flourish like grass<sup>d</sup>  
and all sinners thrive,  
They are destined for eternal destruction;  
9but you, LORD, are forever on high.  
10Indeed your enemies, LORD,  
indeed your enemies shall perish;  
all sinners shall be scattered.

#### The Church Gives Men Roots

Comforting, indeed, is the revelation the church channels to her worshipers. The future, the psalmist exults, belongs to those who order their lives after God's will and way. For unlike the wicked, they are not like the grass, which has shallow roots and is thus quickly seared by the sun. Rather, the righteous are like the country's palm trees and her cedars of Lebanon with their deep-seated grounding (Psalm 92:9-12).

It is significant that the poet makes this dual comparison, as Alexander Maclaren once suggested. For, as he indicates, the palm tree, gracefully slender, is ever green and fruitful, while the cedar, with its broad foliage strikingly green against Lebanon's snows, stands in massive strength against the storms. So stalwart is the latter, in fact, that, as Maclaren puts it, "one cedar outlives a hundred generations of the grass and flowers that encircle its steadfast feet." So is it, the singer announces, with the righteous who are

You have given me the strength of a wild ox;<sup>f</sup>  
you have poured rich oil upon me.<sup>g</sup>  
12My eyes look with glee on my wicked enemies;  
my ears shall hear what happens to my wicked foes.<sup>h</sup>  
13The just shall flourish like the palm tree,  
shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon.<sup>i</sup>  
14\*Planted in the house of the LORD,  
they shall flourish in the courts of our God.  
15They shall bear fruit even in old age,  
they will stay fresh and green,  
16To proclaim: "The LORD is just;  
my rock, in whom there is no wrong."

In effect, the psalmist is saying that what is good endures, and what is evil dies. Hence, age will not wither nor custom stale the role and achievements of the righteous. For rooted and grounded in God as they are - thanks to the nurturing of the church - they will continuously tap ceaseless powers that neither time nor adversity can diminish (Psalm 92:14).

Here is no emphasis on negative goodness. Righteousness, the poet suggests, is more than restraint from wrongdoing. To tap the streams of God's grace is to assume the responsibility of showing that "the Lord is upright" (Psalm 92:15). The only way to delight in him, therefore, is to carry out God's purpose daily.

Thus, the church provides people with roots, not merely for security, but for growth. The roots must be nurtured regularly to probe deeply, however, else they will not hold before life's storms. The Scotch fir, with its massive boles and gnarled branches, gives the appearance of strength as it stands outlined against the sky. But it does not sink its roots vertically. Instead, it runs them laterally beneath the soil. As a consequence, for all its apparent sturdiness, it topples in a heavy wind. So, too, the author warns, righteousness can never be taken for granted.

Long after the psalmist's lips can no longer sing his love song to the church, the Apostle Peter sums it all up by urging the saints in his fellowship to exert every effort to continue growing in grace and the knowledge of God (2 Peter 3:18).