

Accidental leader

Readings 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; 2 Corinthians 11-17; Mark 4:26-34 Rev J Shannon

The story so far

The Lord tells Sam to go pick another king. We are told the Lord regretted making Saul ruler of all of Israel. Actually, The Divine didn't want Israel to have a king at all but the people *insisted* so Saul got the job. Saul was eminently qualified. He was well bred and educated but we know it did not work out well.

So, The Lord tried something else. Rather than pick someone who is qualified – let's randomly pick a good person and see how they grow in the job. What could go wrong?

So Sam has a good look at Jesse's sons and awaits instructions. Not him, not him and not Shammah. Nope, nope – past 7 sons and finally, the last one, the youngest. Glowing in health and good looking too, the Lord told Sam to anoint him. ...and the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully on David. Bubba David, the sheep herder. In the scheme of things, Saul was a flower and David a weed.

You've heard the parable of the mustard seed a thousand times. You've probably heard everything there is to hear about Mustard seed. Yes, it's a bush, not a tree. Yes, its seed is small but not the smallest. Yes, it is indeed a weed that farmers desperately tried to eradicate as it spreads like wildfire and takes over good grazing land. But let's not take this too seriously. I believe you are *supposed* to suspend reality when chewing on a parable ...or at least, let your imagination run wild.

So let's talk about weeds. Another truism – you all know a weed is just a plant in the wrong place. After of years of farmers trying to eradicate them – they have been re-discovered as the saviour of damaged land. No kidding. For our friends in Wyndham, this is, probably, no surprise.

Horse breeders have discovered weeds help restore compacted ground. Weeds help break up the soil and let moisture in. Graziers have discovered weeds bring bioenergy back to dead soil that's been overgrazed and abandoned. Dry land farmers have discovered weeds eat salt and prevent saltpans growing – they also restore natural soaks bringing water back to paddocks that have died. Weed islands are restoring bee populations where they have disappeared due intensive farming. If paddocks are slashed before the weeds seed, the weeds and their roots, which are deep in the ground, will die and break down,

allowing air and moisture to penetrate deeply and adding mineral enriched organic matter to the soil. Need I go on?

Even after a bushfire – it is weeds that do the heavy lifting. They grow back first, helping to stabilise the soil from erosion and begin to feed the starving wildlife.

And here I quote a recent agricultural article, “Permaculture designers understand that, once a native landscape has been pushed past the point where it cannot repair itself, hardworking immigrants (weeds) are required to fill the niche.”

OK, I’ve made my point.

I’m a weed. I’m an immigrant and even my genetics are alien to the human landscape around me.

I never thought of it before but I am proud of a heritage of hard-working immigrants building Australia and bringing good coffee. There is nothing like the commitment of a person (or a plant) out of place.

I was in Canberra last week and a gentleman left a message on the Manse answering machine. It took a few days to call but when I did, I discovered he had been patient in the Canberra Hospital 9 years ago and he remembered me as his chaplain. 9 years – a long journey of recovery. I was astounded he remembered me. We talked for an hour.

Have I told you how I became a chaplain?

Somewhere in my midlife crisis, I made a resolution to return to my true self. We get so busy with careers and families – we just lose the person we once knew. I made a commitment to join a local congregation (my previous excuse for not engaging in a Canberra community was my job required too much weekend travel) and to volunteer for something – anything! To get back playing my part in making a better world. I was always committed to that – what happened?

Well, I joined a church, St James in Curtin, and I did my bit on the roster. But I hadn’t quite got around to the 2nd resolution – to volunteer. The war memorial took too much training. Homeless breakfasts were – well too early! I guess LifeLine was a possibility but first I had to take a moment and pick up the phone.

One Sunday, a potential new member of the congregation turned up. At morning tea, he stood all by himself – poor fellow. Typical, everyone was so busy catching up, no one noticed so I did my Christian duty and sidled up for conversation.

Turns out he was just appointed the Chaplain to 5 Canberra hospitals and he was ½ time. The other half was as the Minister to Cooma an hour and 15 minutes away. “Oooh”, I said. “That’s a big job. You must have lots of volunteers!” just making conversation, mind you. “no” he said, “I only have one and that’s my wife.” “That’s terrible!”, I exclaimed.

Now have you ever had one of those moments when you wish you could snatch your talk bubble back out of the air? I knew what was coming.

Having tried in every conceivable way to talk him out of inviting me, I gave in. He had an answer for everything.

I knew nothing about chaplaincy (and I mean *nothing*) and I certainly wasn’t religious enough. Well, I told God I’d volunteer for something and here I was, anointed.¹

Some of you may have read the articles in *Perspective* where I tried to explain what I was learning. I met the most amazing people and had the privilege of not just walking with them but learning from them. Generous open-hearted people who taught me, spiritually fed me and set me out on the road for others.

And now, every now and then, I will meet someone who says, “you walked with my husband” or “your grounded-ness helped me make the decisions I had to make” or “I was so lonely and you made it OK” and occasionally, just occasionally, “I joined a church”. These are the seeds that weeds spread.

David didn’t ask to be king. He wasn’t perfect for the job. He would have felt ill-equipped. How do you go from shepherd to king? He made mistakes and hubris got him more than once but he is remembered as the greatest king of Israel.²

God knew that a shepherd had within the very skills necessary to be a great king and He equipped him.

¹ I can’t help but wonder what David thought he was getting into as the oil dripped down his neck.

² Practically everything is named after him

Just as God knew my ‘outsided-ness’, my unreligious nature would be what would make me suitable and practical for unconnected people and people asking the really big questions that challenged their traditions. Let’s look at Mark again...

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The parables are outrageous stories to help us imagine the unimaginable. Nothing in David’s life led him to think he would be king. Nothing in my life imagined me standing here.

We are the mustard seeds. We are the weeds that help regenerate others. We leave an indelible impact on someone every time we open a door. Every door opened is a chance for life to get in. Every time we say good’ay and chat up the lonely dog walker. Every thoughtless act of kindness is a mustard seed stored in someone’s soil.

And years later, you might get a phone call...

Or not.

God sees your gifts and gives you opportunities to plant them.

Lord, if I am a fool, let me be a fool for you. Thank you for imagining me as so much more than I feel. Give us the seeds to cast carelessly so that our weeds may grow into flowers of the heart. Amen