

What a lovely idyllic picture we have in our reading from Isaiah today. Woody Allen once said of this vision: "The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. But the lamb won't get much sleep!"

There's a lot that we could have a look at in this passage, which is one of the traditional 9 lessons read during a Carol service. So much so that it could be overwhelming. But of all the verses with all the wonderful imagery, I'm just going to focus on verse 1. It may seem quite mundane in comparison with the rest but as any gardeners out there will know, sometimes you just have to give small signs of growth some light and some space, some water and a little nurture to grow.

Isaiah 1

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a branch will bear fruit".

Jesse was the father of David, grandson of Ruth and Boaz. At the time of Isaiah, we're now several generations down the line from Jesse. Israel had experienced mixed fortunes in the time in-between. Members of that royal line had been assassinated. The family tree had been cut-down.

All seemed lost. Everything seemed dead.

Remember this is Jesus lineage! Think about the genealogy in Matthew 1 again. What would history have looked like if the line had been forever broken?

But against all odds, contrary to all expectations, a small shoot appeared from a stump. That shoot was probably a man called Josiah. The Bible describes him as a very righteous king, a king who *"walked in all the ways of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left"* (2 Kings 22:2 and 2 Chronicles 34:2).

The Hebrew word for "shoot" (11:1) can also mean "rod" or "sceptre." So, there's some wordplay here linking the promise of new growth and new life with that of a new ruler.

Re-imagining

But before we consign this away as a piece of Hebrew history, we know that we Christians think of this as a prophecy about Jesus. That's why it appears in our Carol services and in our hymns. But I think it applies to us too because Isaiah imagines God's words being used and reused.

Isaiah 55: *As the rain & the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth & making it bud & flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

And in Isaiah 43: *See I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

So, what does this verse have to say to us today, here in Four Lanes End?

We see real-life illustrations of this verse in nature, don't we? I've told you before about my wife's tree-felling exploits... We had 2 trees in our garden cut-down to stumps which subsequently sprouted again. One got some more drastic attention and is no longer with us – but the eucalyptus is not just hanging-on in there but is as tall as it was before. I'm sure, like the lamb, that it sleeps at night with one eye open, waiting for Mrs Banks to approach, axe in hand! And we've all seen seedlings improbably growing from out of a rock or a wall where there was seemingly very little chance of soil or roots to sustain them.

Sunday@Seven

Thinking of a worship illustration, in our Walmersley Road Benefice we have an informal service on a Sunday evening at the end of each month. A few months back one of our number shared how remote and cut-off he felt from God. It was moving and it was uncomfortable - but we committed to pray for that person. He's not out of the woods yet. Sometimes there are signs of progress and sometimes not. But the bravery shown and the vulnerability in opening-up has given permission to others to take part and to share, often in an impromptu way. It's brought a different dimension to that service which would be hard to imagine in any of our other regular worship.

And I see signs of this scripture in Four Lanes End! From Quarterly services a couple of years ago to now a regular monthly service. We have new people coming along and we can be freer to try things here than perhaps in more traditional settings. Speaking personally this is one of the few opportunities I get to run a complete service. But it takes effort doesn't it? Effort from many of you to prepare and effort to come along, often just after we've been to morning service somewhere else.

And sometimes there aren't very many of us. This church is delicate but tenacious. With the names on the wall looking down at us from the past. A crowd of witnesses willing us on. Part of a continuum of faith.

Fragile but stubborn

So, my take from this verse is: don't decide too soon that things can't grow. You may personally be in a place which seems dead and in despair, where things seem hopeless. But things *can* grow again. It may only be a shoot. It might still be fragile, but it's stubborn.

It can be a seedling growing from a wall, or a man who feels able to share, or a worshipping community that at times wondered about the future.

But don't expect tall cedar trees every time. Sometimes what we get can be small, surprising, unusual. At first glance we might even overlook what's happening or we might not even like the look of what we're seeing.

Remember Isaiah 53:2 - *“For he grew up before them like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him”*.

God comes to us in Advent encouraging us to not count the rings of the dead wood of the past – but to look at the green seedling of the future. However small, however fragile. **Amen**

'Delicate but tenacious' was delivered by Ian Banks at Four Lanes End Congregational Church on Sunday December 8th 2019. It was based on [Isaiah 11:1-10](#). For Ian's last talk, 'Frisky and frolicking', please press [here](#).

Reference:

- This was inspired by https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1940