



Greening

The 2nd in a series of 4 sermons for Ordinary Time

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14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Zechariah 9:9-12

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

God of life, may your Word grow in us and grow us. Amen.

Today I share the second reflection of a four-part series focusing on aspects of "Ordinary Time". First, a brief recap of last week.

My theme last week was "growing". I explored the concept of Ordinary Time – the description we use for the season we observe now through until Advent. We have journeyed through the biggest festivals of our church year - Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Now, for a while, we settle into a rhythm of what I called "here we are" – a time of focusing on being in this place, in this world, facing the challenges of living our faith.

During this time our liturgical colour is green, symbolising growth, life and hope. Last week I used this theme of growth to share some of my story and the ways in which I have grown in God in recent months as I discerned God's call into leadership among you. I spoke of God's invitation to live from the standpoint of love and trust, rather than fear and loss, as we process and reflect on the challenges we face. All situations offer learnings and growth, if we are open to them.

Building on last week, the theme I'd like to explore today is "greening". This word came spontaneously to mind as I pondered a framework for this series of sermons, and when I went looking for a meaning to flesh out what I meant, the one that came closest to the sense I was seeking was *"the phenomenon of vitality and freshness being restored"*.

The seasons of the church year we observe were born in the northern hemisphere. The major festivals of Christmas and Easter were grafted onto pagan roots that focused on the cycles of nature and the seasons. For example, it was quite natural that Easter was grafted onto a spring festival that celebrated new life and new beginnings. North of the equator right now, this stretch of Ordinary Time is a time of light and growth – the days are long, the sun is warm, and trees are full of new green life. Nature is flourishing – the natural world fits beautifully with the symbolism of green as the colour for Ordinary Time. But here in the southern hemisphere, the seasons and feasts have been dislocated from their original roots. So, in this land, this long stretch of Ordinary Time with its theme of growth occurs in the midst of winter. The days are shorter and colder. It's tempting to hunker down and wrap up and stay inside. It's a while yet before we sense the turning of the season towards spring and the new growth.

So how, for us, can this be a season we associate with the greenness of growth? Where is the green in this winter-time stretch of Ordinary Time, in Aotearoa New Zealand?

As I have pondered this question over the past couple of weeks I didn't have to go far for an answer! As I walked on Mt Kaukau recently and looked upwards to follow the call of a tui, I was struck afresh by the sight of the green bush canopy above me, with the blue sky beyond. Even in the depths of winter, our native bush in this land is forever green. The trees here that lose their leaves are mainly exotic - deciduous trees introduced from other lands. But the DNA of this land of Aotearoa New Zealand is ever-green. In the midst of winter our bush remains lush, diverse, and full of life. And when efforts are made to restore areas of native bush after being stripped or used for other purposes, the land slowly but surely regenerates to its natural native state. Ever-greenness is in the DNA of this land, our home.

Here in Eastbourne, the bush is on your doorstep. Regular walkers no doubt notice the changing seasons in the bush in subtle ways, but its “ever-greenness” remains. The more I think about it, the more this long stretch of Ordinary Time fits quite profoundly in the midst of our winter. In her book *“Celebrating the Southern Seasons – Rituals for Aotearoa”* Juliet Batten says this:

“Winter solstice, the longest night of the year, is a time when nature seems to stand still; a key moment of deepening and withdrawing. Long shadows shape the land. Deciduous trees turn bare while native trees announce their greenness wherever mixed plantings occur. The sap has withdrawn, night closes in early and days are short. In the bush, little seems to be happening, but puriri flowers appear to be more abundant now, attracting bellbirds, tui and silvereyes. Kohehoke lets droop its long white flower sprays and the sweet scent of whauwhaupaku (five finger) wafts out from the winter-flowering clusters of tiny flowers.”

“Native trees announce their greenness” In this land, our native bush stands as a beautiful green, year-round manifestation of God’s creative character in this part of the world. There is a constancy about the ever-greenness of our bush that offers us wisdom in this Ordinary Time – the constant faithfulness of God.

“In the bush, little seems to be happening, but...” In the midst of the ever-greenness of our bush, there is always something dynamic going on. There’s a complex web of interrelationships among the flora and fauna, with each part contributing to the whole, that reminds me of the sacred threads that bind all of God’s creation together.

Yesterday I asked my son, who often walks up Mt Kaukau, what words come to mind for him when he walks through the bush. He came up with these words: *wild, unkempt, mysterious, and untouched*. Perhaps that sense of mystery and wildness speaks of the ever-active, but sometimes unpredictable outworking of God’s Spirit in us and in our world.

So if we do have this daily reminder of greenness around us, especially here in Eastbourne and the bays, how might this inform our walk with God through this stretch of Ordinary Time?

In today's Gospel passage Jesus continues his ministry of preaching and teaching. Last week he was teaching his disciples. In today's passage he is addressing a larger crowd of people about the relationship between him and God his Father. He thanks God in prayer, and goes on to explain what walking with him is all about. Here's how *The Message* translation brings these words alive:

²⁰ Next Jesus let fly on the cities where he had worked the hardest but whose people had responded the least, shrugging their shoulders and going their own way...

Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: "Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that's the way you like to work."

²⁷ Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. "The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen.

²⁸⁻³⁰ "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matthew 11:20, 25-30)

"The unforced rhythms of grace" Jesus invites us to walk with him, and to learn as we go; grow as we go. The invitation is to do so openly, without burdens or the weight of self-judgement. One of the hardest learnings for me in my walk of faith is to let go of a rather heavy layer of self-expectation. It comes partly from my "perfectionist" streak. Many years ago, in my early days of stepping enthusiastically into various church ministries, a fellow parishioner, older and wiser, said kindly to me: "Don't take yourself too seriously." I recall I was very earnest and driven in my new-found inspiration to get involved and serve, but it wasn't sustainable. Over time the ministries and the expectations I had of myself and others became a burden, not a blessing.

Today Jesus's words remind us that there is a simplicity and a lightness about walking with him. When we're tired, when we feel we're carrying heavy

burdens, that's when Jesus says: "Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life." Or "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". We may struggle to hear Jesus' voice in the midst of our own clamour, or we may hear it and choose to ignore it....but that is Jesus' invitation.

What better place to do this, to go for a walk with Jesus, than the green bush that's on our doorstep. So here's an Ordinary Time invitation for you:

Venture into the bush for a short walk this week.

Walk slowly and purposefully, imagining that Jesus is walking right beside you, that you can hear his footsteps beside yours.

Use all your senses: look up, down and around you; touch what you see; listen to the sounds around you; smell the scent of the bush; taste the air as you breathe.

If you can't get to the bush, spend some time some other way pondering God's world around you.

And I invite you to collect something you find, something from the path in the bush, from the beach, or even something from home that speaks to you in a fresh way this week, as you make time to listen to Jesus' invitation to go walking.

Bring your symbol next week and we will offer them to God as we worship.

Let's see what symbols we notice around us that in some way connect us to our God of growth and greenness, in the midst of our own ordinary time.

To close, I'd like to read to you a reflection by Joy Cowley, called *Greenness*.

*Dear God, there are times
when I hear your voice most clearly
in greenness: in the singing of sap,
the conversation of the leaves, the whisperings
of shoot and stem, root, sap and cell,
calling me back to creation
to feel again the freshness of you
running through everything
like a bright emerald current.*

*God of greenness, you know well my tendency
to fill my life with my own methods
of communication. Thank you
for constantly returning me
to the simplicity of yours.
Again I experience you in the rejoicing
of bare feet on a damp forest path,
in the wonder of light thrown against
a kaleidoscope of tree ferns,
the embrace of moss-clad trees,
in the shining of You beneath every surface.*

*Beloved Creator, coming to your greenness
is always a coming home,
a time of peace and grace
as the unimportant in me falls away
and I know again that bright green shoot
of my own beginning
which comes from you
and is one with you,
bright and beautiful God.*

Joy Cowley, Aotearoa Psalms

