

The Christmas tree: Isaiah 61.1-4

Today's TFTD comes from Robin. Don't forget to go to our church website to experience the Advent Calendar online to find a story, a song and a craft activity linked to today's TFTD. Just click on the link below:

<https://www.stphilipandstjames.co.uk/advent>



If you have ever called at the vicarage you will know that to get to my front door you have to cross a small desert of asphalt adorned with three bins and a collection of things I need to take to the dump “when I get a minute”.

To take the edge off this desolate vista, I have positioned a few large plastic pots around my front door. They contain lavender, rosemary and bulbs and things like that.

One of the pots contains a self-sown sunflower that, remarkably is still in bloom. The

pot next to it contains some self-sown pot marigolds, also still flowering. None of them look especially healthy. But as we approach mid-December they are hanging on in there, making the most of the heat that escapes from the vicarage porch.

Our Scriptures are full of images of plants and trees. Isaiah 61:3 reads

to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory

Isaiah is talking about the oppressed, the broken hearted and those who are held captive. With the coming of the Kingdom of God, they will stand glorious and proud like mighty oak trees.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul echoes the passage in Isaiah that refers to a new shoot emerging from the root of Jesse; a shoot that will rise over all the world (Romans 15:12). The root of Jesse was buried in the ground; it looked dead and buried. But it wasn't dead, merely dormant. Isaiah was saying that the day was coming when a new shoot would grow from that root lying dormant in the ground. And Paul was saying that Jesus was that new shoot, alive and ascended into heaven, ruling over all the world.

One of my mother's favourite Christmas carols (so, therefore, one that I sang as a child) is called *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*. Catherine Winkworth, a prolific translator of German hymns who worshipped at St Philip & St James, loosely translated the first verse of this hymn as follows:

A Spotless Rose is blowing,
Sprung from a tender root,
Of ancient seers' foreshowing,
Of Jesse promised fruit;
Its fairest bud unfolds to light
Amid the cold, cold winter,
And in the dark midnight

It's a really old German carol, first appearing in print in 1599. That didn't stop the Nazis demanding a rewrite. They objected to the references to Christ's Jewish roots and so for a few years they tried to force people to sing "Uns ist ein Licht erstanden/in einer dunklen

Winternacht" ("A light has arisen for us/on a dark winter night"). For a while the root remained dormant. But it had not died. And, sure enough, when Germany's dark winter night passed, new shoots began to emerge.

Jesus, preparing the disciples for that time after he had died, risen and ascended, and they would be left waiting for his return, pointed to the fig tree and all the trees (Luke 21: 29-31). Just because they are dormant in the winter, he told them, you don't lose faith that they will produce shoots in Spring. In the same way, when you are waiting for the Kingdom of Heaven, don't ever doubt that it is coming.

We never used to sing *O Tannenbaum* as children because my Mum doesn't like it. It is her least favourite Christmas carol. Maybe because its basis in Scripture is rather more obscure than *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*. It is a song of praise of the fir tree, who remains defiantly green even in the depths of winter a bit like my spirited little sunflower.

At a time when the lives of so many people are desolate, the church needs more than ever to proclaim its faith in the coming of the Kingdom. Just as Jesus came into the world, growing like a shoot from the root of Jesse, so his Kingdom is also coming just as winter is followed by spring.

One sharp frost will take away my miraculous sunflower and even the hardy bunch of pot marigolds will also wither and decay. In the spring I will pull out the weeds that will undoubtedly grow in my pots. I will disturb the soil as I do so and that will trigger the germination of more seeds, pot marigolds, sunflowers, who knows what else. The soil is pregnant with life. And the visible witness of my evergreen plants, the rosemary and the lavender, remind me of this.

I know that life will burst forth once again. I am certain of it. This image helps to sustain my faith in the certainty of the coming of the Kingdom. May it also sustain the hope we proclaim in a world that for now sees nothing but desolation all around and ahead.

We are called to remind the world that it is God's world. He has not forgotten it. Like the evergreen fir tree, he is always faithful. He is coming to save us all.

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