

Changing the landscape....



The Mulberry Tree by Vincent Van Gogh. This glorious autumn tree growing in a landscape of bare rock was painted during his time as a patient in a mental hospital, a testament to his ability to create beauty in times of huge challenge. To see, create and share a landscape of hope and glory..

I remember standing in Durham Cathedral, marvelling. Marvelling at all the huge thick pillars with patterns carved into them; this huge, beautiful soaring structure raised by hand – by people working together, massive stones transported across miles, before the age of much machinery. Marvelling at the stories of the saints and the worshippers woven into the air – stories of holiness, and intrigue, and danger and reconciliation.

Marvelling at its impact on the landscape, both the physical landscape of the land, and the internal landscapes of heart, politics and faith. Both the stones of our faith buildings, and the communities of faith, endure through the ages and turns of history, and not just endure but shape the landscape around them.

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed – (only so small) – says Jesus today – you could tell a Mulberry tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. Or as it is in Matthew's gospel - *if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.*

Whether it's a huge stone edifice, or a human community that strives to live in love... Jesus says it *is possible in faith to change the landscape*.

Increase our faith, say the disciples... for once the disciples get it right – they recognise there is no 'Ten Steps To A Greater Faith' YouTube video – Faith isn't something we can do for ourselves – but a grace of God. And they ask God to grow it in them, to change their inner landscape, by drawing them into his.

Faith is something we are drawn into – when we trust God to breathe in us, to pray in us, to act through us... Just the faith as small as a mustard seed that asks him in ... is enough.

God does like working in little things. Don't worry about the size of your faith, says Jesus –just keep letting me in, let me draw you into this new landscape of love that I am inviting you to share with me.

That phrase *Nothing will be impossible* refers us quite intentionally back to the Annunciation¹; *Nothing is impossible to God* – records Luke – neither Elizabeth conceiving in her old age, nor Mary's own conception of the Lord Incarnate.

Referring to God's joining of humanity into Divine Love – his sharing, if you like, of his gift for the impossible, for the Godly, with us humans....

... Yes... I know that's impossible... but....

(whispers)

... nothing is impossible to God....

So, when we are caught up into faith, into God's own love, Jesus says... don't worry... *nothing will be impossible for you...*

But *what was it that the disciples found so impossible?* What was it made the disciples cry out in horror '*Increase our faith!*'?

Jesus had just been talking of building human community. Of how we can make each other stumble, of how we can hurt each other; of how to use honesty, accountability and forgiveness to build an empathic, loving, community.

Jesus has told them that faith is about 'living out the love' with each other. And that can feel hard. Especially when we truly acknowledge our own frailties, and how difficult it can be to share responsibility, or to forgive each other. Now we can talk another day about what forgiveness might look like in the Christian Faith, but it is important to note it is *not* being a doormat to violence and abuse – but it *is* about freedom, freedom to let go, to stop things eating us up, and devouring the

¹ Luke 1: 37

possibility of building safe communities together - of... creating landscapes of love in our broken world.

On Durham Cathedral's North Door is a big heavy Lion's Head ring knocker, which those who 'had committed a great offence,' such as murder in self-defence or breaking out of prison, could knock, to be given 37 days of sanctuary inside the Cathedral - within which they could try to reconcile with their enemies or plan a new beginning in a new place.

Sanctuary. It stems from sanctus – holy – a place of holiness, in the presence of God. But it has become a widely used word for all sorts of refuge and new beginnings I suppose being and breathing in God's presence is a place we associate with new possibility

Move a mountain? Change a landscape? Small faith can accomplish huge things – Martin Luther King confronting armed police, dogs, water hoses and violence in the civil rights movement, Bishop Desmond Tutu confronting the full power of the state in opposing apartheid; the tiny seeds of Liberation Theology from the base communities in South America who shifted the immovable weight of the Roman Catholic Church, governments and regimes, in its search for economic and social justice – all of these altering the landscapes of America and South Africa fundamentally.

Don't worry about the impossible, says Jesus. I have already done it, and I will continue to do it in you.

You might expect a God to treat his creations like slaves. To give them nothing more than their due. And for whom humans in turn do only what they ought to do. Nothing more – certainly not the impossible.

And there we have the rest of the gospel – that left the phrase 'worthless slaves' ringing in our hearts.

But I, says Jesus, the Servant King, am not interested in that sort of slavery. I have come to be one of you and even more – I have come as one who serves. That in me, you may see – and be caught up into - a new way of community – a new possibility – to see with my eyes, love with my love.

And then... so much more than 'only what ought to be done' may be done in the world.

Jesus takes us on an incarnation journey – where Thou – or you - becomes Us – just as it did at Christmas.

Can you imagine a master who knows what its like to be a slave? he asks. Can you imagine what that might look like in the world?

Who says to a slave returning from work ...

come here and take your place at the table –

or if we translate the Greek more literally....

You, having now come along, recline and eat.

Well, no. Impossible. Slaves were slaves. They were to do their work, and ... then not to be your problem until you needed them to do their work again.

Now imagine yourself as the slave, says Jesus –

Jesus, the one who Luke reports as saying “I am among you as one who serves²”.

The one who started on the throne of heaven, who knelt before us on the night we arrested him, and washed our feet, who hung on the cross for us – who descended to literally the bread on the table on which we feed.

That we may all rise in him.

When we let go and let go until we, like Jesus, become the bread on the table - we find ourselves as yeast, as salt. As the early morning smell in the air of the world, fresh, uplifting, wholesome.

When you are at the bottom. I am with you he says. When we are at the bottom together, as a community, we can lift each other up; we can lift the world up.

To we ‘who now come along’, Jesus takes the bread of his body and feeds us – *come, he says, come, recline and eat.*

If your faith seems small and things seem impossible – remember God does like working in little things...

Remember... in faith we can change a landscape, a heart, a world-view ...

For nothing is impossible for God in us.

² (Luke 22:27)