

God gives the growth

O Father, our hope;
O Son, our refuge;
O Holy Spirit, our protection;
O Holy Trinity, glory to you. **Amen.**

Adapted from the Prayer of St Ioannikios, c. 762-846

As an older woman entered a country church, the usher asked her where she'd like to sit. When she indicated that she'd like to sit in the front row, the usher said she shouldn't sit there, because they were having an extremely boring guest preacher that morning.

The woman, bristling at that response, asked, 'Do you know who I am?' When the usher said, 'No', she exclaimed, 'I am the preacher's mother!'

The usher asked her if she knew who he was, to which she replied, 'No'.

'Good,' the usher said.

Friends, my mother is *not* here today.

[Jesus] said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

Listen to a similar story, another Jewish story:

All their lives two brothers had lived in the city behind great stone walls and neither saw field nor meadow. But one day they decided to pay a visit to the country.

As they went walking along the road they saw a farmer ploughing. They watched him and were puzzled.

'What on earth is he doing that for!' they wondered. 'He turns up the earth and leaves deep furrows in it. Why should someone take a smooth piece of land covered with nice green grass and dig it up?'

Later they watched the farmer sowing grains of wheat along the furrows.

'That man must be crazy!' they exclaimed. 'He takes good wheat and throws it into the dirt.'

‘I don’t like the country!’ said one in disgust. ‘Only crazy people live here.’

So he returned to the city.

His brother who remained in the country saw a change take place only several weeks later. The ploughed field began to sprout tender green shoots, even more beautiful and fresher than before. This discovery excited him very much. So he wrote to his brother in the city to come at once and see for himself the wonderful change.

His brother came and was delighted with what he saw. As time passed they watched the sprouts grow into golden heads of wheat. Now they both understood the purpose of the farmer’s work.

When the wheat became ripe the farmer brought his sickle and began to cut it down. At this the impatient one of the two brothers exclaimed: ‘The farmer is crazy! He’s insane! How hard he worked all these months to produce this lovely wheat, and now with his own hands he is cutting it down! I’m disgusted with such an idiot and I’m going back to the city!’

His brother, the patient one, held his peace and stayed in the country. He watched the farmer gather the wheat into his granary. He saw him skilfully separate the grain from the chaff. He was filled with wonder when he found that the farmer had harvested a hundred times the seed that he had sown. Then he understood that there was a reason for everything the farmer had done.

The point of the story is this: Mortals see only the beginning of any of God’s works. Therefore they cannot understand the nature and the end of creation.

We are here for a short time, and see very little. It’s the same with the mission of God. In 1 Corinthians 3.6-7 the Apostle Paul says,

I planted, Apollos watered, but *God gave the growth*. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but *only God who gives the growth*.

I don’t know about you, but I hear a fair bit about how churches are supposed to grow. There are lots of programs out there, lots about how to get more people into your church, lots to lower our anxiety levels about how badly the church is going.

Many of them claim that if you follow some simple steps, you’ll get more people. Just get the right technique, follow the plan, and there’ll be more bums on *your* seats.

It reminds me of a lovely story told by the late Lesslie Newbigin. Lesslie Newbigin was an English Presbyterian who went to India as a missionary and became a bishop in the Church of South India. Quite a leap!

Once, Newbigin was called to a remote village in his diocese to preside at some confirmations. Not so unusual. But this was a whole community of people who had been converted to Christian faith. Newbigin decided to investigate their story.

It turned out that they had encountered a number of Christian people, who came into their lives one by one. They weren't all missionaries; one was an engineer. They weren't all the same type of Christian.

Some of these westerners were conservatives who would have thought the others were too liberal. Some were liberals who would have thought the others were too conservative. Some would have considered that some of the others weren't even Christian.

Yet God's Spirit worked through them. God's Spirit revealed a kind of life that attracted these Indian people, and led this community to take the costly step – in that culture – of being baptised.

And now Lesslie Newbigin was coming to confirm them. Remember the moral of the story about the two brothers?

Mortals see only the beginning of any of God's works. Therefore they cannot understand the nature and the end of creation.

And we so often see only part of God's mission.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

These people who were instrumental in the conversion of these Indian people weren't all consciously on mission. They were relating to the locals. They impressed them by their care, their integrity and their air of peace.

One more story.

I knew a young Chinese woman who was studying sports history in Beijing. Christian missionaries introduced a lot of the sport in China, so she went to Christian mission offices to look at their historical archives.

Her experience of life in China had been one of continual and over-the-top bureaucracy. So when she fronted up to the missions, she had all her identification papers ready and was prepared for careful scrutiny—perhaps being made to wait some time before being allowed to see the archives.

For the first time in her life, she was warmly welcomed by strangers. Her papers were looked at briefly and then waved away; they didn't need to look at them.

She was so impressed by the reception she was given that she was drawn to investigate the faith these people professed. Eventually, she embraced it for herself.

You don't have to be doing religious things to be on mission. It doesn't only happen in bible studies and church meetings, important though they are. Mission happens in shops, in service and sporting clubs, in any and every walk of life. I remember two minister friends of mine in small towns—one went on mission by joining the local brass band, the other by joining the bowls club and developing relationships in those places. God is on mission everywhere—even there!

How does mission happen? How does the seed grow quietly? How does God give the growth?

Often it's in ways unseen by us. We don't plan it. We can't plan it. We can make plans; we can implement our plans. But it's our place to be faithful; to follow the Spirit's leading; to build right relationships in each and every thing we do. God works in every part of our lives, planned or not, church-related or not. And it's *God* who gives the growth.

Let us pray:

Jesus, weaver of story, sower of seed;
show us the new creation in small beginnings,
and teach us to look
for the coming of that perfect day,
when all things shall be reconciled in you,
the bringer of God's realm of grace
now and for ever. **Amen.**