

Connecting faith and daily life

Withering and wilting

Caroline Hodgson *reflects on* Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1 and Luke 6:17-26

From reading today's Old Testament and psalm it seems clear that it's preferable to be a tree planted by water than a shrub in the desert. So why do we often end up resembling the latter?

Today's Gospel reading gives us a clue as to why our faith might wither and wilt. This passage, sometimes known as the Sermon on the Plain, comes early in Jesus' ministry – the first time he preaches after choosing his disciples. The people want "to be healed" and are "troubled" – and he cures them. Thirsty for healing, they recognise Jesus' power and crowd around to touch him, as the woman with the issue of blood would later do.

Given such desperation surrounding him, it might be perplexing that Jesus' sermon is anything but comforting. He talks of those who are poor, hated, reviled and defamed, who weep. Yes, he tells them that they will be blessed, but only after a life of suffering and rejection. On the other hand, those who are rich, well fed, who laugh and are well spoken of, have already "received your consolation", and can expect to be hungry, to mourn and weep.

Perhaps it's little wonder that we more often resemble a desert shrub than a well-watered tree. Nobody said it would be easy, and Jesus spells out just how hard, but ultimately rewarding, it is. Because if we learn how to negotiate (and even, by God's grace, enjoy) the hard part of faith, we will ultimately have cause to "Rejoice... and leap for joy". 🌸



Oh Lord, whose presence brings healing and whose word quenches our thirst, prepare us to meet life's challenges head on, sure in the knowledge of our reward in heaven. Amen.

Poetry and faith

John Donne (1572-1631)

by Julia McGuinness

Intellectual rigour and intense energy made John Donne a poet of uncompromising courage who went straight to the heart of the paradoxes of Christian spiritual life.

Donne faced accusations of self-interest, converting from his persecuted Catholic roots to a more acceptable Anglicanism; and from a courtly career blighted by a secret marriage to his patron's niece to a vocation as priest. His ministry culminated in his

becoming Dean of St Paul's in 1622 as he turned his poetic attention to love divine rather than human.

"Batter my heart, three-person'd God," is the opening cry of one of his Holy Sonnets. Frustrated at his own sluggish spirit, the poet urges God to take his soul by force. "Unless God binds him," he concludes, "he never shall be free/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."

Here is someone who means business with God, who can match the psalmist's bold use of language that pulls no punches in pursuit of intimacy with his maker. 🌸

People of the New Testament *Joanna (Luke 8:1-3; 24:1-12)*

by Caroline Fletcher

When we imagine Jesus travelling around teaching and preaching, we probably envisage him accompanied by twelve men. But a closer reading of Luke's Gospel reveals a surprise. It was not just the Twelve, but a much larger group – even more surprisingly, many of these were women.

We first hear about Joanna in a passage that offers an insight into this wider group of disciples: "The twelve were with him, as

well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities... Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza... and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."

Some scholars argue that Joanna could be the source of Luke's empty tomb account. If so, we owe her a huge debt. More than that, there is good reason for believing she could be the same person as Junia, who is greeted by Paul at the end of his letter to the church in Rome. If this is right, then she really did play a very significant part in church history. 🌸

“Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author