

The Tree and the Reed

By Margaret R Baker

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? **A reed swayed by the wind?** (Matthew 11:7).

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. **He is like a tree planted by streams of water**, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither, whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1:1-3).

If someone was to say, in the course of conversation, "*But all that glitters is not gold,*" or "*He needs to look before he leaps,*" those statements would be instantly understood even if they appeared to have nothing to do with what was being said. This is because we have been brought up with these sayings and know the meaning of them beyond the basic words which they contain. So it was in Israel during the first century. When Jesus said, "*What did you go into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?*" – no-one said to Him, "*What are You talking about?*" – as Nicodemus said when Jesus told him that he must be born again. Neither did the disciples come to Him and ask Him to explain as they did when He taught in parables. This was because they all instantly recognised the words as an old saying and understood its meaning. So for us to understand we need to go back and look at the old saying or parable. This was the parable of the tree and the reed.

Imagine travelling along a river by boat or on foot, particularly a part of the river where pasture comes down to the water's edge; perhaps the kind of place where you might stop for a picnic. You will notice an occasional large tree. These trees are usually tall, straight trees, with deep roots going right down under the river and a spreading canopy of strong branches. Trees like the oak or the sycamore. They survive through the hot summers because their roots go down deep and when the cold winter winds blow it's as if they say to the wind, "*If you want to blow this way you will have to blow round me. I am not moving.*" Of course the tree is not invincible. Sometimes a hurricane comes along or a twister which will topple the tree so that it dies.

Also along the river bank you will find the reeds. They grow in beds in their hundreds. They grow by the water and in the water but do not have deep roots so they dry out and look brown and dead in summer. When the winter winds blow on them, they are happy to bend this way and that, surviving only by compromising their position in the wind.

So when Jesus asked the people if they went to see a reed swayed by the wind they all knew that He was seeing John as a tree; a strong oak refusing to bend in the political winds which blew. They would not have gone into the desert to see a reed. They had plenty of those already. Herod himself compromising with Rome to gain and keep his position as king; the chief priests also compromising with Herod and Rome to keep their positions of power. The ordinary people needed to see no other reeds bending and blowing in the wind. It was John, straight and solid who could be relied upon to tell it how it was. He brought people to repentance and faith in God, reminding them of their position in God's Kingdom regardless of Herod and Rome. How easy it would have been for John just to keep his mouth shut as Herod and his wife passed by the Jordan. But no! That was not what he was there for. His

mission was to point out to everyone the danger of ignoring God and compromising God's law and that included Herod. There could be no exceptions. Herod like the common man had to be given the opportunity to repent and turn his life around. Sadly, unlike his godly predecessor, King David, Herod chose not to take this opportunity and eventually became the hurricane that uprooted the strong tree and John lost his life.

It is always so easy to be a compromising reed. Our churches today are filled with reeds. Like the trees on the river bank, those who are prepared to stand straight and unbending are fewer in number. However, it is easy to know who they are. Like the trees we must be putting down deep roots so that we are able to stand as the winds of change blow over this land, knowing that there is always the possibility of the hurricane which will uproot us all.

Measuring a tree is easy. If your arms will not meet around its girth you know it is a large tree, strong and useful. By the world's standard measurements, it is easy to measure a woman. Not so easy perhaps to measure a man. Do you measure his muscles to see how strong he is? Do you measure the width of his shoulders to see how reliable he is? These measurements take into account only the outward appearance and are of little value. However, there is an old saying, "You measure a man of God by the size of his heart," which is his capacity to love as the Saviour loved. The larger the heart, the larger the tree. Let's strive together in this time of crisis, and always, to be those trees planted by the water.