

maranatha

Growth in Christ

God calls us to move forward

The Gospel is about radical change, transformation and growth. Growth is a sign of life. For the Christian faith is a living thing – it is either growing or it is dying.

We are pilgrim people, forever on the move. Christianity can never be a static belief system because it is a dynamic pilgrimage of faith. If we are not moving forward in faith, making new discoveries, and becoming stronger day by day, we are in danger of stagnation and spiritual death. This death is rooted in disobedience, complacency and, ultimately, unbelief.

As we move forward we are increasingly filled with God's powerful spirit. Paul, speaking of growth, says "*May he give you the power through His Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your heart through faith and then planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God*" (Eph 3.16).

The call of the Early Church was to growth – "***Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ***" (2 Peter 3.18). The development of our faith means that we move to an increasing fullness of being.

To grow to maturity we need to exercise our will. We can only be built up in faith if we are true to ourselves. Are we prepared to allow God to reveal the truth about ourselves? Are we prepared to open the door containing our innermost thoughts and feelings? Are we prepared to allow the light of Christ to shine brightly into the darkest corners and recesses of our life – not to destroy, but to purify? By doing this we open up ourselves for growth and development – allowing negative and highly destructive feelings to drain away our shame and guilt at what we are. We allow ourselves to be bathed in His love.

We enter into an intimate and personal relationship with Him. We start by being little children – there is no other way.

The Bible is full of examples of growth. The boy Samuel “continued to **grow** in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men” (1 Sam. 2.26). The Gospel records of John the Baptist “The child **grew** and became strong in spirit” (Lk. 1.80). Saul, the persecutor of Christians after his dramatic conversion “**grew** more and more powerful” (Acts. 9.22). Jesus, even as a boy, amazed everyone when he was in the temple with his understanding and his answers and the Gospel tells us “Jesus **grew** in wisdom and in stature” (Lk. 2.52).

As Christians we are called to be involved in the continuing process of growth, becoming the special people God always intended us to be: “If we live by the truth and in love, we shall **grow** in all ways into Christ who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding to its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function so the body **grows** until it has built itself up in love” (Eph. 4.15 & 16).

God calls us to be His children

The starting point of genuine discipleship is to come to God in the first instance as little children to a loving Father. Jesus says that unless we become as little children we can't enter the Kingdom. The Father watches over us as we grow in faith, hope and love. He encourages, rebukes, guides and comforts us. It is His intention that we should grow into mature men and women. Flowing from this maturity we will see renewal and revival in the churches. As children we live on milk but when we become mature we take solid food. The immature are told in Hebrews 5.11 “you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the **mature**, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil therefore let us go on toward perfection....”.

This process of becoming more and more consecrated to God is central to the Christian life. It is dependent upon us having a right relationship with God.

As Christians we cannot remain the same. We have to grow up – “When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor. 13.11). Every believer must pass from spiritual childhood to the state of the mature Christian by his growth in the knowledge of God. Only then can he be fruitful. We are taught in Colossians 9.10 that we should “lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you **grow** in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from His glorious power and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Col. 9 10-12).

God calls us to maturity

The letters of the New Testament are full of references to growing strength and love, increase and maturity: “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so,

because your faith is **growing** more and more, and the love everyone of you has for each other is **increasing**" (2 Thess. 1.3); "this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight" (Phil. 1.9); "May the Lord make your love **increase** and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you" (1 Thess. 3.12).

In the Old Testament it is emphasised that those who grow in grace recognise that their strength increases as they advance – "They go from **strength to strength** till each appears before God in Zion" (Ps. 84.7).

In our pilgrimage of faith scripture encourages us to persevere, be patient and hold on to our faith: "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be **mature** and **complete**" (James 1.4). In the period of growth "you have need of patience" (Heb. 10.36) and the teaching is clear "hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5.21).

The Early Church was strong in its call for maturity – "We warn and teach everyone with all possible wisdom in order to bring each other into God's presence as a **mature** individual in union with Christ" (Col. 1.28).

Christ points to the similarity between natural growth and spiritual growth

The analogy between our growth in faith and the growth of a seed in the ground is spelt out clearly in the Gospels. "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4.26-29).

Christ's message is that we are to move towards maturity. His teaching about the Kingdom is clear "It is like a mustard, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade" (Mk. 4.31).

In his parable Jesus spells out precisely the analogy of the living word of God within us living or dying. It is a serious warning to every believer – "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown" (Lk. 8.5-8).

Seeds will not live if they are walked over on the path, dried up in the rock or choked by thorns. Seeds will live if they are planted in good soil and are watered.

Jesus warns of the way in which good seed may be sown but the enemy comes and sows weeds. The good seeds are like the sons of the Kingdom; the weeds are like the sons of the evil one. (See Matthew 13). The analogy with growth is developed by Jesus he declares, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener" (Jn. 15.1). We are the

branches of the vine and we **depend entirely** upon Christ who is the source of our life. We will not grow, blossom and bear fruit if we are detached from Him.

We need to be nurtured by the Spirit if we are to grow

The Bible repeatedly gives analogies with nature about the process of growth. In the early story about Eden we read, “*There was a river **watering** the garden*” (Gen. 2.10). If there is no water, there is no life and if there is no life there is no growth. Today, our condition is that “*we are like a garden without **water***” (Is. 1.30). We will only grow to maturity if we allow the water of God to nourish us. Deserts can be utterly transformed by **water**. We see so many references to springs, wells, streams and rivers, and promises are made “*Streams of **water** will flow*” (Is. 30.25). “**Water** will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert” (Is. 35.6). “**I will pour water on thirsty land**” (Is. 44.3).

If we are sustained and nurtured by Christ, if we feed on Him, if we remain close to Him – “*He who began the good work in you will carry it on to **completion***” (Phil. 1.6).

The great call to the Early Church, through the establishment of the four-fold ministry, was “*to prepare God’s people for the works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become **mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*” (Eph. 4.12 & 13).

We will grow if we deepen the roots of prayer, if we deepen the level of our listening to God and if we deepen our awareness of the real presence of God with us. As we grow we will see more clearly and we will hear more clearly. As we grow all hindrances and blockages to communion with God will be removed. In growing we will accept the discipline and dedication of our wills to the Kingdom. As we grow we will develop a readiness for change – to new experiences of God in our lives. We will discover that He has new things to say to us and new things for us to see. We will become increasingly dependent upon Him. We will be increasingly aware of the active power of God working in us. We will have a closer and more intimate relationship with Christ.

We will become more generous in Spirit – more loving, more forgiving, more understanding. We will have a growing self-knowledge as the Holy Spirit reveals to us the deep and often hidden areas of our life and consciousness. We will acquire a deep inner peace – the Shalom which heals. As we develop an interior communion with God we will be given a greater awareness of the needs of the world. Above all we will be given a sense of the personal presence of God at all times.

Are we growing in faith, love and hope and in our knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ?

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