

The Mustard Tree (*Salvadora persica*)

I remember the year that my husband planted the mustard tree which stands beside our house. Almost since the day we had married and moved into our house, I had nagged him to plant us a tree which would grow quickly, and would provide shelter for us as we worked weaving baskets for the village. But he is a man who likes to think carefully, to plan and to



research. It is what makes him a good craftsman, but it can be very frustrating at times. As it was, our son was nearly eight years old when Nathan announced that he was going to the next village to deliver a big basket, and while he was there he was going to pick some fruit from a mustard tree which the client had beside his house. He asked Jonathan if he would like to come with him, and Jonathan asked whether he could bring his friend Jesus as well. The three of them set off with the old donkey carrying the awkward basket.

When they came back several hours later both Jonathan and Jesus looked as if they had been in a fight as their tongues and lips were purple from having eaten the fruit which they had picked from the mustard tree. They came running towards me, and when they opened their exceedingly grubby fists lying in their hands were some small white seeds. When Nathan joined them, he took the seeds carefully from them and put them in a small close woven basket, and left them in the sun to dry. Over the next few days the seeds turned from white to a pale pink to a pretty deep purple colour.

The land around our house is more stone than soil, which made it very good for building the house on, but no good for growing things. Nathan, with help from Jonathan and Jesus dug a big hole. They separated out the stones, then added some donkey dung to what was left and put it back in the hole. Nathan went and collected a couple of baskets full of good soil from a neighbour's field to fill the hole back up again. The boys then used the big stones and made a little wall around the newly filled hole. All three of them fetched water from the well and poured it on the soil soaking it thoroughly, then Nathan handed Jonathan the basket of seeds. Using a finger to make a hole in the soil, he planted six of the seeds, which he then covered back over. All three of them stood and watched almost as if they thought that the tree would grow before their very eyes.

When I had asked Nathan for a tree for shelter, I had imagined something tall and elegant with a long straight stem and a beautiful balanced canopy of leaves. I asked Nathan why he had chosen the Mustard tree, which grows only about 20 feet tall, is nearly as wide as it is tall and has a gnarled and crooked stem even when it is young. Nathan smiled. 'Well', he said 'the Mustard Tree is nothing much to look at, but its branches are very dense, so it will provide us with plenty of shade. It doesn't grow too tall so that it would become a danger to the house, or us, if branches began to fall off. It won't need watering once it is established, and most importantly it will grow here in the rocky ground next to our house.'

Within a few days tiny little shoots appeared in the walled hole. Jonathan watered them every day until they were about six inches tall, and Nathan said that they would be able to manage on their own. Jonathan was devastated one morning to discover that a neighbour's goat had got loose during the night and had eaten five of the seedlings down to the ground. He got Nathan to make a loosely woven basket to put over the remaining seedling to protect it. When the tree was several feet tall, and doing its best to escape the basket, Jonathan removed its protection. It grew steadily year after year. We gave it an extra drink of water the year yellow tendrils appeared hanging from the branches, and the unassuming flowers appeared for the first time. The fruits were delicious.

When the branches of the tree were about the width of a man's thumb, Joseph sent Jesus over to ask for a couple of branches. When I asked Jesus what he wanted them for, Jesus just shrugged, so in curiosity I went back to the carpenters workshop with him. Joseph took the branches and cut them into lengths of a hand span. Taking one of his tools he cut the bark off about an inch of the branch, and with his fingers teased out the fibres of the core. He then promptly put it in his mouth and began to use it like a brush to clean the teeth. He quickly made another one for Jesus and one for me. Within weeks we were supplying the whole village with toothbrushes. We had the best teeth in the area!

One year Jesus decided to see whether there were birds nests in the tree. It was growing so low to the ground, and so densley, that for some reason best known to himself he decided to dive headfirst straight into the lower branches. He must have just caught one of the branches with his hand, for we all came running at his cry of pain, and watched bemused as he backed back out of the tree with a large piece of wood passing through the palm of his hand. I took him indoors and pulled the wood out. I poured water over the wound, and then packed it with a healing salve made from the leaves of the very tree that had injured him. I sent him back to Mary with a bandage on his hand. Still he had answered the question he had set out to answer. He had seen some nests in the branches before he had managed to get out again, even if he had sent all the birds in them rising into the air as he landed in the tree.

I watched Jesus and Jonathan mature into fine young men. Jonathan married, and I have grandchildren who have slept in the shade of the tree as I make baskets and watch over them. I had long known the story of angel who announced Jesus conception and Mary had told me of the visitors, shepherds and wise men who came to see Jesus when he was born. I watched him grow into a studious young man who worked hard at his studies with the Rabbi and hard in the carpenter's workshop first learning from Joseph, then taking over from him when he died. Many of the young women in the village threw themselves at him, but he didn't seem to notice. Mary never went to the matchmaker, so Jesus remained unmarried. He was away quite a bit taking made items to customers, and going to work on new buildings, so when we began to hear stories about him performing miracles and healings, we hadn't really noticed any change in his behaviour. When he came back to the village and read from the Torah, and then announced he was the Messiah, we had to hide him from the fury of our neighbours, in the tree of course. As I heard more and more of the stories about him, I came to believe that he was the Messiah. I went to listen to him once when he was passing near the village. When he told the crowd that the kingdom of God was like a mustard seed, a small seed which grew into a plant that birds could rest in, I heard a couple of people comment that their black mustard plants didn't grow big enough for birds. This started a debate with people nearby, and the biggest anyone could come up with was about nine feet tall, which he claimed he had seen a bird in. When I caught Jesus eye as he listened into this conversation, he just winked at me, and I knew he was remembering the tree he and Jonathan had planted, which provided pain and healing, food for us and the animals, as well as shelter from the sun and from angry neighbours.

Nathan and I went with Mary to Jerusalem for the Passover the year Jesus was crucified. Mary seemed to know and understand what was happening there. I couldn't believe that his dying like that, as a criminal on a cross could be what God wanted for his Messiah, for little Jesus who had played with my son. When I saw him hanging there on the cross, his face bloodied, his lip split where the guards had ill treated him, I was reminded of the day he ate the fruits of the Mustard Tree to find the seeds. But his hand, the hand I had held and healed, now nailed to the cross; I wanted to tear the nail out with my bare hands and pour cleansing water over it and smother it in salve and bandages. But I couldn't. It seemed like the end, when I was hoping for a beginning.