

16 June 2024 – 11th Sunday

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(1) Ezekiel 17:22-24

It is the Lord who plants and grows; who raises and humbles

Thus says the Lord God:

“I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, so that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.

Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.”

Responsorial: from Psalm 92

R./: Lord, it is good to give thanks to you

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,

to sing praise to your name, Most High,
to proclaim your kindness at dawn
and your faithfulness throughout the night. (R./)

The just one shall flourish like the palm tree,
like a cedar of Lebanon shall he grow.
They that are planted in the house of the Lord
shall flourish in the courts of our God. (R./)

They shall bear fruit even in old age;
vigorous and sturdy shall they be,
declaring how just is the Lord,
my rock, in whom there is no wrong. (R./)

(2) 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Paul's boundless confidence in God, in spite of setbacks and opposition

We are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

In a parable, Jesus notes the mysterious miracle of growth and fruitfulness

Jesus said to the crowds, “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.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.



Purposeful Inactivity

With this Sunday, we return to “ordinary time” and take up again the regular reading of Mark. We get to hear one of the very few passages in Mark not taken up by Matthew or Luke, the parable of the farmer asleep. With all the drive and tension in Mark, it is

refreshing to reflect on this parable of *purposeful inactivity*.

[Kieran O'Mahony]

May our church be fruitful

Spiritual renewal is the gift of God, through the Holy Spirit and through prayer. As Ezekiel—surely a keen gardener himself—puts it graphically, it is God who does the fundamental planting of his people. The sprig from the cedar's lofty top is planted on a high mountain, and for a noble purpose. In our tradition, God's favoured tree is the holy catholic church, called to be a welcoming family, source of both enlightenment and comfort to people of all nations. This tree, of God's own planting, must be there “so that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar” providing shade for creatures of all kinds.

Jesus was a great believer in and promoter of renewal, both of his hearers' personal outlook and of the structures and priorities of the Jewish religion. In today's parable, he draws attention to the mysterious miracle of growth and fruitfulness. Yes, of course the gardener must do the initial spadework, and subsequently whatever weeding and watering may be required; but in the end it is the Spirit of God who makes fruitful change happen. So we call on the Pentecostal Spirit to breathe strongly on our Church today, and awaken in all our hearts that loving desire for sharing, for *communion*, which is the ideal at the heart of each Eucharistic congress, and indeed of every Mass.

When it comes to rediscovering spiritual priorities in our lives, we

can find uplift in today's hope-filled words from St. Paul. In the middle of all the turmoil and tension he felt in dealing with dissent in Corinth, he holds on to his confidence in Christ, as his invisible, ever-present friend. Paul can be serene even at the prospect of his own death, when he will be more "at home with the Lord." He then adds a guiding principle valid for each one of us: "Whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him." Without giving up on all hope for collegiality and dialogue in our Church, these are secondary to our basic trust that it is and will remain the *Church of Jesus Christ*, whose Spirit will stir up whatever is needed to make his Church grow and thrive.

How does it happen?

Children are great for asking questions. They ask one question and, having received an answer, they ask another. As children grow into adolescence, they begin to ask more probing questions, questions that look for some kind of light to be cast on the deeper issues of life. In time, they may come to realize that clear answers are not always to be found to life's more profound questions. As adults we often have to reconcile ourselves to living with many unanswered questions. We discover that all our searching will never exhaust the many mysteries of life. We continue to take delight in making fresh discoveries, but we also realize that coming to terms with 'not knowing' is an important part of life's journey.

Today Jesus speaks a parable which acknowledges the mystery that is at the heart of the most everyday experiences of life. A farmer scatters seed on the good soil of Galilee. Having done the

sowing, all he can do is to go about his other business, while the seed takes over and does its own work, producing first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, until the crop is ready for harvest. In the parable it is said of the farmer that 'he does not know' how all this happens. Between his actions of sowing the seed and harvesting the crop, a great deal of activity goes on, which is invisible to him and which he does not fully understand. There is a great deal in our world which we do not fully understand, in spite of the great expertise that has developed over the centuries on all aspects of our universe.

He begins with the statement, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like.' Jesus seems to be saying that if the farmer does not know the ways of the humble seed, how can any of us fully know the ways of God? If growth in the natural world is mysterious, how much more mysterious must be the growth of God's kingdom? The Jewish author of the book of Qoheleth expressed it well, 'Just as you do not know how the breath comes into the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.' With the parable of the seed growing secretly Jesus says that the kingdom of God can be growing among us in ways that we do not fully understand, just as the seed the farmer sows in the ground grows to harvest in ways he does not understand. There is a reassuring, hopeful message here for all of us who may be tempted to discouragement by the slow progress that the ways of God appear to be making in the world. The spreading of God's reign is ultimately God's work and that work is always under way, even when we do not see it or understand it. We have a part to play in the coming of God's way of doing things among us, just as the farmer has a role to play in the coming of the final harvest. However, that first parable in the gospel warns us against overestimating our role. St Paul expresses this perspective well in

his first letter to the Corinthians, 'Neither the one who plants, nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.'

The second parable in today's gospel reminds us that God can be at work in situations and places that seem very unpromising to us. There is a stark contrast between the tiny mustard seed (*the smallest of all the seeds*), and the large shrub that grows from it, in whose branches the birds of the air can nest. Insignificant beginnings can lead to a wonderful result. The kingdom of God is like that; it often finds expression initially in what is small and seemingly insignificant. We can feel that our own faith is insignificant, as small as a mustard seed. Jesus assures us that the Spirit is working in and through such faith. Our hope can appear to diminish to the size of a mustard seed. The parable says that such hope is enough for the Lord to work with. Our various efforts can seem to bear very insignificant results. The parable assures us that the Lord will see to it that the final harvest from those efforts will be abundant.

Sometimes we have to learn to be content with the small seeds that we can sow, trusting them to bear fruit in ways that will surprise us. The kingdom of God is something very humble and modest in its origins. We need to learn to appreciate little things and small gestures. We may not feel called to be heroes or martyrs every day, but we are called to put a little dignity into each corner of our little world. There are little seeds of the kingdom that all of us can sow, a friendly gesture towards someone in trouble, a welcoming smile for someone who is alone, a sign of closeness for someone who is in despair, a little ray of joy for a heart full of distress. God's reign comes in power through the seemingly insignificant actions of each of one us.

