

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Ezekiel 17:22-24 / Mark 4:26-34)
13.06.2021

When we compare today's Gospel parables with some others we read we could classify today's as rather gentle. The kingdom of God is depicted as coming about in this world in a quiet, discreet, humble, and peaceful manner; without clamour. *A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know.* It is not a matter of anything being forced upon anyone; there is no great push. The coming of the Kingdom is brought about without a display of power and might. To the contrary. So much happens under the surface, hidden from view; drawing little attention to itself.

Given that the images employed to describe the coming of the Kingdom are drawn from nature, it seems legitimate to think of the Kingdom's coming in its world in a way that is akin to simple natural development.

Let's look briefly at the two parables heard this morning.
Both speak to us of life coming forth from the earth.

What is the first thing required for life to come forth from the earth?

The very first thing is for seed to be sown in the soil.

When we read today's Gospel passage we hear mention of a sower who has sowed seeds in the land.

The seed and the sower is the Lord Himself. A hymn we sing here at the abbey in our repertoire of chants reminds us of this when it has us sing to the Lord: *We praise the sower and the seed, Thee.*

Of course, once the sower has done his bit, once he has scattered the seeds upon the earth, it depends upon the soil into which the grain has been sown to come into play.

In the Gospel parables the earth is the People of God: indeed, all those in whose hearts the seeds of the Kingdom have been sown.

We are the earth in which the seed is sown!

That being said, it also befalls us – as God's servants engaged in the Church's mission, which is an extension of Christ's own mission – to become sowers of the seeds of the Kingdom in our turn. As Christian witnesses we are sowers of the seeds of the Kingdom and we are also its seeds. That hymn from which I have already quoted – a hymn taken for Martyrs' feast days – has us declare: *Thine was the first and holiest grain, To die and quicken and increase; And then came these, and died again; That spring and harvest should not cease.* The point made there is that Christian witnesses have taken over from Christ the role of seed and sower, or rather that Christ now pursues His sowing of the seed in and through His witnesses, Christian men and women who live missionary discipleship.

As disciples, as sowers of the seed, all of us are called upon to echo God's word. We are meant to share the message of Christ's Gospel with all around us. The Good News has been confided to us so that we may spread its message in God's wide field – which is the whole of creation.

It is not only (or even primarily) by preaching and teaching that we spread the Gospel, but in so many other ways. Above all, we bear witness to the Gospel and sow the seed of God's word by the quality of the lives we lead. It is by the example of holy lives (by living our existence in wholesome, integrated ways) that we contribute to the coming of the Lord's Kingdom in this world.

It should be clear to us that it befalls each and every one of us not only to receive the seed of God's word into our hearts so that it may be held and take root therein, but also so that it may sprout forth new life and bear fruit which can nourish other people's lives – touching their hearts as much as our own. To spread the Word is inherent to our vocation as missionary disciples. That is a responsibility Pope Francis is continually reminding us of.

The second parable heard in this morning's Gospel passage draws to our attention in a particular way the smallness of the seed that is planted in the earth.

With mention of the smallness of the seed, I hear a call addressed to us to be humble about the little part we play in God's great work.

Our efforts and our impact will often be very modest indeed. Few of us will make *a great splash*, if I can put it that way. But, I am sure that the little we have to offer – the small seeds we dare to sow, simply, with generosity and in faith – can make an important contribution to God's work. With the Lord's blessing accompanying it, the little we bring to God's great work can and will make all the difference.

That the grains sown are quasi imperceptible strikes us all the more when we consider the visibility of the trees that come forth from the earth as a result of their having taken root in the soil and emerged to become part of the landscape.

I find this thought consoling.

When we are left wondering – as we are at times – what if any sense our lives have, what, if any, impact we have made, are making or yet may make, today's Gospel parables are there to reassure us. They show us that it isn't always the spectacular that matters most, but frequently what is done discreetly and humbly.

Often what counts most is our simply being there... our being seen to exist... our being perceived as a loving presence in today's often love-starved, not to say, loveless world.

Put simply, it seems to me that what the Gospel passage heard today is saying to us is just to do our little bit; to speak whatever life-giving words we are given to enounce, trusting in the Lord to make use of our small contribution in whatever way He sees fit.

We will add little or nothing to the work of God by making much noise about it. We might even distract from God's work by raising a clamour as we labour to accomplish it. This might only attract attention to ourselves and, in so doing, detract from the fact that what we are engaged in is God's work. The attention that should go to Him and not to us!

When it comes to engaging ourselves to do anything with and for the Lord; when it comes to ministering in His name; when it comes to exercising a share in His authority... what matters is that we hold one sole desire in our hearts: the desire to serve Him and to serve His people – the two are one and the same thing.

It is so important for us to grasp what is said at the end of today's first parable. It isn't what we do or what we don't do that counts. As we already noted, it doesn't matter if the sower is awake or asleep. What matters is simply this: that the sower releases the seed into the earth and then stands back to allow God to give growth to the seed sown. We can sow. We can water. It is God who gives the growth. St Paul reminded his readers of this, calling upon them to exercise humility and bidding them to see God as the One who matters most in the whole evangelising process.

To realise that what counts is what God does is actually very liberating.

It pacifies us to know that it is not our performance that matters most, but God's Spirit at work within whatever we place at the Lord's service.

This is important to grasp at a time like the present phase we are traversing as Church, a period when we see little or no results for the many efforts being made to proclaim the Gospel far and wide.

Understand me.

I am not saying that we have not to seek to make God's word heard and His will known, but rather that we should be clear within ourselves that it is God's word and God's will that really count... and not just ours! Whatever work we are engaged in should be seen for what it is: *the work of God!* The *work of God* and not our *work for God*.

St Benedict insists strongly upon the whole notion of the *work of God* in his Rule for Monks. That idea is very different to working *for* God.

When we are properly engaged in the Lord's service we do whatever He bids us do; we are not so much brilliant entrepreneurs as we are (or at least we strive to be) simple servants. The interior posture required of a monk in the Rule of Benedict is that of one who sees himself to be simply God's worker – the Prologue of the Rule speaks of *the Lord seeking a workman among the multitude*. A simple worker in the sense of the Rule will be someone who allows himself to be Spirit-led; someone who acts out of obedience, doing whatever the Master tells him to do.

I would like to make one final point by insisting upon something which I believe to be emphasised in today's Gospel passage. It should be said that this was already prepared in today's first reading from the prophet Ezekiel.

My final point is the importance of our being gathered together by the Lord: the idea of our being sheltered by, the idea of our sheltering in, the Lord.

The image of a tree in whose branches, under whose leaves, the birds of the air take shelter and find shade speaks to us of God's people being united... and thereby protected.

Birds take shelter and find shade in the leaves of a tree. Already their nests are formed out of a tree's twigs. Most often they are hidden in a tree's branches. This makes of the tree a place of birth, and a place wherein life is protected.

At this time when we who are God's People are led to feel vulnerable; at this time when we are feeling weary and burdened... How important it is for us to allow ourselves to be encouraged by the idea of new birth and also of protection being offered to us!

God's House, the Church, is sometimes likened to a tree. It is thought of a tree planted beside a river – a source of nourishment for its life.

May the Kingdom of God come in our hearts and in the hearts of all those whose lives are rooted in the Lord!

And, may we who are citizens of the Kingdom, through the seed of God's word sown in our hearts, become more and more agents of the coming of God's Kingdom in today's world!

Amen!