

## **ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

*Gospel: Mark 4:26-34*

Jesus said to the crowd, "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.

### **REFLECTION 1: THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

In the year 1965, when McDonald's Corporation went public, common shares in the company sold at \$22.50 each and if you had purchased 100 shares at that rate, your investment would be worth nearly \$6 million today. That's nearly 3,000 to 1! Not bad by any measure! In today's Gospel story, Jesus compared the kingdom of God to the tiny mustard seed that grows up to be the greatest of shrubs. So, today we ask how great is the shrub of our Christian faith? The tiny mustard seed of the Church was planted with 12 disciples and today it has grown to 2.3 billion members.

When speaking to the crowds about the kingdom of God he was about to found, Jesus used parables – stories about what was possible and obvious truths. The reason for this was that the minds of the people of his day were focussed on a worldly kingdom. They wanted a political Messiah who would set them free from Rome and give them a great empire. Only gradually did Jesus manage to wean them away from that idea. In the meantime he describes the kingdom he was founding in a way they would later understand.

Jesus' stories or parables are taken from everyday life in Palestine. They are about farming and fishing and the herding of sheep. The kingdom that Jesus is to establish will grow and increase quietly – no uproar or rebellion, no war or turmoil would be necessary. It will grow from the very smallest beginnings but will become so great that the birds of the air (the people of earth) will flock to it for food and protection.

The Gospel today tells about a farmer who has ploughed his field and scattered grain on it. Then he leaves it and goes about his other daily tasks. He doesn't have to work it further, the soil does the rest, and the ripe crop will come in good time. Then the farmer will return to his field and reap the harvest. The mustard seed that was sown was not really the smallest of all seeds, but for the size of the plant it is relatively smaller than any other seed. The mustard plant reaches about 2 meters or more and has wide spreading branches, the birds relish the seeds it sheds and find protection in its shade.

Notice how in the conclusion of the Gospel for today, Mark tells us that Jesus 'spoke in parables as they were able to hear it and that he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything'. The prevailing political atmosphere of the day prevented him from declaring his messiahship for fear of an imminent uprising against Rome, but afterwards the disciples would understand about the tree, that had grown from such a tiny seed. To his disciples Jesus explained what he meant in his parables, but even they were slow to grasp the full meaning of his words.

To conclude, I would just like to focus on that first sentence of the Gospel, the reference to the kingdom of God. This is a key phrase used by Jesus, and Mark's Gospel starts off with these words; 'The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news'. Those who believed that Jesus came on earth to get us into heaven often associate God's kingdom with the place we are planning to inherit after our physical death – that we are here on this planet to avoid hell and get into heaven. The truth is that the kingdom of God is a biblical way of saying that God is working effectively in our lives here and now. It was never about going through the pearly gates into a new realm of existence. It describes the existence we all share at this point in salvation history – an existence in which God is working all around us before we come face to face with God in heaven. Christianity is all about the present, the eternal now, today. Past graces have vanished, while future graces beckon before us. Only each day bears a satchel on its back, bearing the graces to live that day to the full. As the 'Philosophy of Life' puts it; *'I will greet each day with joy in my heart. I will welcome everyone I meet today with friendship, as a brother or sister in whom the spirit of God dwells. I will be conscious of the fact that every hour, every minute of the day is an instalment of life's allotted span and that every day bears a satchel on its back with only the grace to live that time to the full. I will not agonise over the lost opportunities of the past or fantasise over the dreams of tomorrow.'*

## **REFLECTION 2:**

## **SOWERS OF SEEDS**

As the world population grows, scientists ask if the planet will be able to produce enough food to feed everyone. The U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that 11% of the world's 7 billion people are undernourished. In sub-Saharan Africa, this is nearly 25%. There is enough grain – but we feed it to animals to provide meat. Pope Francis recently warned that the selfish attitude of indifference has taken on global proportions. He reminded us that 'If one suffers, all suffer together.'

In his first letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul offers his perspective concerning the growth and development of the community: 'I planted the seed and Apollo watered it but God made it grow'. This means, he added, that 'neither he who plants nor he who waters is of any special account, only God gives the growth.' (1Cor.3) Ezekiel in today's first reading was reminding his contemporaries of the same truth: God is in charge. Just as God has called the enslaved out of Egypt and gave them a land of their own, so had God, insisted the prophet, been at the heart of every aspect of Israel's history and they should live in reliance on their Maker.

With the first parable of today's Gospel, Mark has made a similar point; farmers sow seeds and do all that is necessary to foster their growth. Even without the farmers' intervention the seed sprouts, grows and ripens to harvest; because it is God who gives the growth. Mark and Ezekiel share their parables not to offer lessons in agriculture but to remind believers that God is at the heart of all we are. We are not at the centre of the universe; rather God is at the centre of all that is. When we fail to reclaim this truth, we lose our roots and cannot grow. We bear no fruit.

So the key question we ask today is what can bring us back to centeredness in God when we are off-kilter or lose? Well, for the Israelites, suffering was often the factor that led them back to God. Whenever they suffered losses in war, disease, famine and exile was viewed by them as a punishment for their sins of infidelity. Through the ministry of their prophets, they were able to accept suffering as a pruning of sorts to make them better and more fruitful servants of God. Now, while we do not believe that God the Author of Life, wounds us or causes us to suffer, nevertheless those occasions of suffering in our lives can be opportunities for growth and development – as persons, as Church. These times are also graced moments in which we grow closer to one another and to all of the human family. In our unity, we become strong and able to bear the good fruits of justice and peace, harmony and truth.

Like the mustard seed in today's Gospel, we may start small (Bíonn gach tosnú lag). However day by day stirred on by the transforming effect of suffering, whether it be through physical pain, sickness,

loneliness or loss of loved ones, we can become a community whose witness draws others to God. As Paul pointed out in today's second reading, all of our growth will depend upon our firm faith in God, who gives us the courage we need in every circumstance.