

## **Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time June 14, 2015**

Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

God is our Father and he has planned a plan for each one of us and like a good father dreams a dream for us. He has made us his chosen people and has showered plentiful blessing on us. He is a benevolent Father who cares for his children. St John tells us that God has loved us so much that he sent his only son for our sake that we may have life through him. God works in every human person as he would work in nature. We can see how God cares for each single item of his creation and builds into it his own presence and action. He manifests himself to us in divine way so that we may understand his benevolence. In the first reading from the book of Ezekiel we see the initiative of God towards the wellbeing of his people. He causes a small shoot to grow into a mighty tree. Planted on a high mountain, it struck roots and grew into a majestic tree that gives the picture of the people of Israel how they turned into a great nation. In the second reading Paul expresses his constant aim of his life is to please God. He talks to the Corinthian community of becoming a New Creation for Christ. In the Gospel of today we have two parables concerning the growth of the Kingdom of God. He uses the image of the seed and the plant indicating how the Kingdom that he is proclaiming would grow quietly as every farmer would experience. It is a call to belong to the kingdom of God, who calls us to put oneself fully, consciously and deliberately under the power of God, to experience that power and be empowered by it.

In the first reading taken from the prophet Ezekiel we find a beautiful passage that talks of how God will restore Israel to himself. Ezekiel was writing during the time of the fall of the Temple and the Babylonian exile. He was the priest of the Temple of Jerusalem and his writing reflects experiences in exile and upon return to Jerusalem. In this passage, he's writing about God's power and attributing all, good and bad, to the power of God. He denounces the sins of Israel which brought on the exile. He foretold greater misfortunes still for Judah, telling them the Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed by the Babylonians and people will be taken into exile. They had deserted Yahweh but their God who loves them so much will not desert them. He speaks of the better days to come when God would take back his people once more and dwell in their midst forever. The Prophet places before them the messianic prophesy in which God says that God will raise up a descendent, a sprig from the lofty cedar of David, who will be the glory of Israel. Planted by God himself, this tree will be a mighty tree. There, under the watchful care of God, the shoot would grow into a mighty tree and extend its branches in welcome to every winged thing. God has promised Israel the messianic restoration and God will keep his promise.

In his letter to the people of Corinth, Paul does not directly use imagery of Growth from nature. He is talking of followers of Christ becoming more and more and more like Christ as the days go by. He talks of becoming a New Creation. This idea of "new creation" is an old one in the tradition which formed Paul. That new creation represents all sorts of potential for change for the better in this case. In this passage Paul tells the Corinthians that his constant desire and motive in life is to please God. In this he wants them to imitate him. While on earth this is his aim and when he goes to God in heaven this will be his purpose and his delight. The Apostle reminds his readers that, at the end of this life on earth, God, who will replace our earthly tent or body with a heavenly or spiritual body, will also hold

each person accountable for the life they have lived in the body. Paul's faith is such that even though he is living on earth, yet he is certain of heaven that depression or despair has no place in his mind. While living in this world we are separated from the Lord who is in heaven. We live our daily lives, faithful to God and we know in faith that we are moving ever nearer to the day when we shall be with God. He promises the community that God is infinitely merciful to us while on earth. If we imitate Paul in the following of Christ we have nothing to be afraid of. If a person in his foolish pride rejects God's offer and settles for paltry things, then he alone is the loser. What is expected of us is to live our daily lives honestly and faithfully.

When Jesus spoke to the people about the Kingdom that he was going to establish he generally used stories or parables to illustrate the obvious facts and explain the truths contained in it. His reason was because the minds of the people were centered on the worldly kingdom they saw and glory and power it contained. Parables are specific literary forms, told for a particular religious or ethical purpose in order to provoke thought and challenge their hearers to decisive action. Every parable has two levels of meaning, the literal meaning and the tropical or figurative meaning to deduce the true and deeper lesson. The people waited for political messiah who would free them from the Roman rule and bring them freedom by providing for them their own empire. Jesus had to clear this wrong idea from their minds. In the meantime he described the Kingdom he was founding in a way that they would later understand. His stories and parables are taken from the everyday life of the Palestinian people and concern, farmers, fishermen, shepherds, and housewives. Today's two parables are taken from the everyday agricultural experience. The Kingdom he was founding will grow and progress in a quiet way without drawing any attention from others, with no rebellion, no war, no uproar or any turmoil manifested in it. It will grow from the smallest beginnings but will become so great that the birds of the air, indicating the people of the earth, will flock to it for food and care. While this kingdom would give total protection to the person, it will also show the concern and understanding the Lord has for his people.

When Mark put today's two parables into writing, he had seen the death of two great apostles of Rome, Peter and Paul. The Parusia or the second coming of Jesus they were expecting had not come as yet. Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome and the faith of the Christians was at a risk. The parables of Jesus given today provide an insight of the Kingdom of Jesus to the early church, as it gives to us today and explains its growth. Here in the Gospel, Jesus is giving an image of that kingship or power of God at work. He compares it to the situation of a farmer planting seed on his land. The parable of the seed on the surface tells us of nature's mysteries of life and of growth. There is nothing as powerful as nature's growth. Jesus says that night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how he does not know."Jesus goes on to say: "Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. The seed that the farmer has sown on the ground sprouts, grows, forms leaves, and gets itself ready to produce, with no one understanding exactly how it happens. The farmer does provide his external help by watering, fertilizing, weeding and driving away birds that may destroy the crop. Jesus goes on telling them that without anyone's direct knowledge the land produces its fruit. When the crop is ready, he loses no time: he starts to reap because the harvest has come.

The picture is clear: the building of the kingdom is God's work. We see the growth of things in nature is often not perceptible. We can see them with periodic observance of the things that are planted or by returning at intervals. It is the same way with the Kingdom of God. It goes on growing whether we are working with it or not; whether we are aware of it or not. It will not be frustrated by any opposition or passivity on our part. We can see evidence of that in the way that the Christian faith has survived over the past 2,000 years. Some people, some governments and other powerful agencies have done their utmost to obliterate Christianity from the area under their control. They have inevitably failed. The reason is that the values that the Kingdom stands for (which are also the same values that the Church stands for) are so totally in harmony with the nature of things and the deepest aspirations of the human person that no intervening force can neutralize them for any length of time. And this nature and these aspirations come, of course, from their origin and creator – God. So, while the outcome of the kingdom is inevitable, it is important that each one of us identify fully with it. The kingdom grows quietly without anyone being aware of it. It is the working of the Spirit that makes the growth possible.

Jesus gives another image of the Kingdom. Here he gives his equally brief, simple and homely parable of the mustard seed which he calls the smallest of all the seeds of the earth. It is in reality not the smallest but proverbially so in Palestine during the time of Jesus it was considered to be so. Here the image is not on the inevitability of growth but of how the Kingdom emerges from tiny beginnings. As in the first parable it contains several points. Here it is smallness against something very large. One begins with the observation that the tiny mustard seed grows into a very large shrub that has large branches, so big that it can provide shelter for birds under its shade. This is clearly a parable of encouragement. We need to remember that when these words were written the Church was still relatively small. It consisted of tiny communities scattered in cities, towns and villages all over the Mediterranean area. Without the communications media which we take for granted today they were to a large extent cut off from each other much of the time. In addition to that, they were often subject to savage persecution. It would be perfectly natural for them to wonder if they could survive into the future. They were like tiny mustard seeds. Yet, given time, this tiny seed will grow into a plant so large that birds can nest in it. Despite its insignificant beginnings Christ's Kingdom has grown tremendously, and will continue to grow. It too reaches far out giving shelter to all races and nations of people.

That vision, given the adverse circumstances in which the Gospel was written, was an enormous vote of confidence in the Church and the future of the Kingdom. Truly, the Kingdom of God in today's two parables is seen as the rule of God in the lives of people and the way in which God works among us. Today's parable assures the readers of the Gospel that, like the mustard seed, they can grow. How surprised those early Christians would be to see the Church today. We can visualize how the mustard seed has grown in the world of today. Christians number well over one billion people now, a figure not even conceivable in olden times. The Gospel's confidence was not misplaced. At the same time Jesus tells us through the parable that we should never be daunted by small beginnings. As with little mustard seed that eventually grows into a large bush, we need patience and participation. We sometimes feel that our little contribution makes no difference. But it does as it is manifested the way we speak, doing a small act of kindness, giving a friendly smile, supporting the people at a good cause and every bit we contribute provides good results.

One of the proofs of the divine origin of the church of Jesus is its growth from its very humble beginnings. Being God, Christ could have come in different ways and preached the whole world without any hindrance and without any human help. He could have transformed the world through extra-ordinary miracles. He could have chosen brilliant persons and not simple ordinary fishermen, tax collectors, freedom fighters, to be his followers. Instead he chose to come into the world as a little baby, the son of a poor mother and a carpenter foster father. He was born in a stable, forced to hide into pagan Egypt to protect himself from an enemy, lived thirty years in an unknown village in poverty, and earned his daily bread by hard work. For the last three years of his life he went round Palestine teaching and healing, often weary, hungry and footsore, preaching the good news of redemption. When the time came for him to lay down his life for his people, he allowed his enemies to capture him and condemn him to the death on the cross. There on the cross he was declared a king but beaten, crushed and crucified. These were surely the humble beginnings for a kingdom which was to span the earth and the ages. The small mustard seed did indeed succeed as per God's plan. It was not the eloquence of the apostles or their gift of persuasion, or their learning that led the pagan world to Christ. It is grace of the Holy Spirit and the objective of Gospel truth that brought the change and transformation. Today as we reflect on the word of God and respond to the call of God we remember the humility and smallness of the mustard seed. Let us come close to Jesus to give our contribution to the growth of this Kingdom.

One day, a brilliantly beautiful and fragrant flower with attractive colors met a pearl that lives far in the bottom of the sea and has none of these characteristics. Both got acquainted with each other. The flower said: "Our family is large; roses and daisies are members of the family. And there are many other species that are various and countless; each has a distinctive scent, appearance etc." Suddenly, a tinge of distress appeared on the flower. "Nothing accounts for sorrow in your talk; so why are depressed?" The pearl asked. "Human beings deal with us carelessly; they slight us. They don't grow us for our sake but to get pleasure from our fragrance and beautiful appearance. They throw us on the street or in the garbage can after we are dispossessed of the most valuable properties; brilliance and fragrance." The flower sighed. And then the flower said to the pearl: "Speak to me about your life! How do you live? How do you feel it? You are buried in the bottom of the sea." The pearl answered: "Although I have none of your distinctive colors and sweet scents, humans think I am precious. They do the impossible to procure me. They go on long journeys, dive deep in the seas searching for me. You might be astounded to know that the further I lay, the more beautiful and brilliant I become. That's what upraises my value in their thought. I live in a thick shell isolated in the dark seas. However, I'm happy and proud to be in a safe zone far from wanton and mischievous hands and still the humans consider me highly valuable." The Pearl added: you are also useful. They enjoy your color fragrance and indeed search for you.

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J., Bangalore, India