

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B) Mark 4: 26 - 34

Today's readings are about how God works – in us and among us. In another sense, we could say that they remind us that God's work will be carried out whether you and I cooperate or not. In human terms, when we choose to cooperate, God's plans will come true and we will experience the great joy of being a part of that.

The Gospel consists of two parables which are quite different in meaning but which have a common theme so vital in our part of creation here in Alberta ... the growth and the harvesting of plants.

In the first parable Jesus tells us what the kingdom of God is like. Perhaps a few words about the Kingdom are in order because it is such an important part of the Gospel message. What is this 'Kingdom'? The first thing we need to understand is that it is not a place. The Greek word that has been translated for us is "basileia" and it is a word that means kingship. It is closer in meaning to our English word reign. The reign of God is the literal translation. So, it refers not to a place like kingdom does, but to God's great power.

To belong to the kingdom of God is not simply to have faith. It means to put yourself fully, consciously and deliberately under the power of God, to experience that power in your life and to be empowered by it. And that power is above all the power of love. It is a creating power, an embracing power - a power that lifts us up and helps us to be true disciples.

When we say the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come", we are praying that people everywhere put themselves under this loving power of God. And our first call as Christians is to belong to, to enter that kingdom and not simply to be a member of a church. The Church is a part of the kingdom, but the kingdom extends far beyond the Church. That is why Fr. Adam in his homily last weekend, taught us that the kingdom is not fully revealed, not yet.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is giving us an image of the kingship, the power of God at work in the world. He compares the situation of a farmer planting seed on his land. The farmer 'would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, without his knowing how.' And Jesus goes on to teach: '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 the sickle, because the harvest has come.'

This is an important lesson for our generation because we live at a time when we have become accustomed to everything being fast, if not instantaneous. From fast food to instant communication we get what we want immediately. This is not how God works when it comes to the presence of his Kingdom in our lives. Like the seeds and plants in the Gospel it must be cared for, cultivated and tended as it grows. At times we can become discouraged, but Jesus tells us clearly by his presence and with his teachings that God is in our midst. He moves so gently, quietly and slowly at times that we don't notice his presence, but he is with us.

The picture is now clear for us: the building of the kingdom is God's work. It goes on 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 by lack of human effort.

We can see the evidence of that in the way the Christian faith has survived for the past 2000 years. Some individuals, some governments, some powerful organizations have done their best to wipe our Christianity from the area under their control. They have failed. And the reason is that the values that kingdom stands for, the values our Church stands for are so totally in harmony with the nature of things and the deepest values of each human person that no political force can neutralize them.

Jesus gives another image of the Kingdom. This time he compares it to a mustard seed. But here the image is not that it will

inevitably grow. Through this image we learn how the kingdom emerges from tiny beginnings. This is clearly a parable of encouragement. The early Christian communities were small, and they faced very real dangers. They were scattered in cities, towns and villages around the Mediterranean area. Those men and women were persecuted and threatened. It was perfectly natural for them to wonder if this new church could survive into the future.

Today's parables assure us as readers of the Gospel that the reign of God, the power of God is with us. And they remind us that, like the mustard seed we can grow. Grow in faith, grow in confidence as individual disciples. In the church that Jesus founded through his apostles, we see the beginning of the complete realization of God's reign in the entire human family. How surprised those early Christians would be to see the Church today! How the mustard seed has grown. Christians number well over a billion people today, a figure those early disciples couldn't even imagine.

The Church is not the kingdom of God, but it is a living breathing, sign of the kingdom. And so, let us concentrate on cultivating our own small field and see the mustard grow there and God will take care of the rest.

Deacon Charles Johnston

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St. Stephen's Parish, Olds, AB

With thanks to Fr. Doyle, SJ for his translation of the Greek/English terminology of the Gospels.