

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, after Corpus Christi Sunday, we return to Ordinary Time with the 11th Sunday, which will culminate with the Solemnity of Christ the King (the 34th Sunday) on November 21. Today's Word of God communicates to us how God acts in human history. It presents a God who is deeply involved in our daily lives and walks often in the midst of very painful events such as wars and natural disasters. He never abandons us, but he has his own way of acting, often different from our way of thinking, which surprises us.

The prophet Ezekiel tells how a cedar of Lebanon is planted and grows to show God's way of working, and the Gospel's two parables about the plant that grows from a seed help us to understand how God acts today, especially in the midst of the pandemic that humanity has been living with for more than a year and a half.

First Reading: A great cedar of Lebanon in Ezekiel 17:22-24

The prophet Ezekiel compares God's action to that of a farmer who reforests the arid peaks of Israel with cedars that are characterized by their great size and height, their durability, and their special beauty. Through this example of a cedar tree that dies and is reborn, Ezekiel speaks of the sinking of the nation of Israel and its rebirth.

The nation is supported by the hope that God will send a Messiah to deliver it from enemy oppression. Ezekiel announces that God is able to transform a tender twig he had planted in the arid soil of Israel into a great cedar. The expectation of the Messiah who will be born as a descendant of David will

become a reality. Although the Messianic hope is still like this twig, in time it will grow and the awaited Messiah will come only if Israel believes in the Word of God.

Ezekiel insists that the new Israel will be like a young shoot planted on the top of the mountains of Judah; the pride of the monarchy and all the dangers of its excessive greed for power that so many times led to the ruin of the small nation will be left behind.

The prophet hopes that his people will be reborn after the Exile and that their lineage will endure as long as the cedars that can last for two thousand years.

First parable: The seed that grows on its own (Mark 4:26-29)

This is one of the most beautiful parables of Jesus: It is brief, consistent, and full of hope. This parable relates the coming of the reign of God through the image of the growth of the seed sown until the harvest: The earth produces its fruit. The emphasis is not on the sowing, which is part of the introduction of the parable, and neither is it on the harvest, however important the final harvest may be. What is important in this parable is the way in which the grain grows without human intervention.

For people today, things are a little different, because they are informed of the biological processes and know how growth occurs, why it occurs and what the agricultural technique can do to make a plant grow faster or slower and bigger or smaller.

The work of today's farmers does not end with planting. They use herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and growth regulators before the stalks grow long, so that they do not grow too tall and thus do not run the risk of being broken by strong storms or to facilitate the harvesting of their fruits.

But in Jesus' time in Galilee all that was very different. The parable describes the impossibility of intervening in the growth of the crops. The farmer has to wait.

"Of its own accord the land yields fruit" (Mark 4:28). Here man can do nothing. He can neither understand nor weigh in the miracle of growth. He only knows that the creative power of God is at work, which in the end will give the harvest.

In conclusion we can say that this parable is about the coming of God's reign. But it is not saying that this reign will come after seed is sown, nor is it saying that it will come little by little, just as grain ripens. No, here it is first of all about the fact that man cannot provoke or force the coming of the kingdom of God, and even less with violence, as the Zealots thought they could do. The human being can only wait. God himself is the foundation of his kingdom and he will build it with certainty.

This parable emphasizes on God's creative power and historical potency. No one will prevent God from doing his work and bringing about his salvation. Man's response must be one of serenity and trust in God.

Jesus speaks about the reign of God through parables

The parable I have just commented on spoke of the kingdom of God: It shows up surprisingly and fascinates us. Jesus says that the kingdom of God has already arrived, and there is no doubt of its victory over the human kingdoms.

But let us not forget that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God aroused contradiction. People must have questioned him saying: "Where is the transformation of the world of which you speak? Nothing is changing in the country! And the Romans continue to plunder us. Those who collaborate with them get richer, and the poor are left more unprotected. Everything is going on unchanged behind the scenes. And now a small and helpless group walking with you through Galilee will be the beginning of the true Israel? If God finally intervenes, through Messiah sent by him, should not his actions be seen in a totally different way: imperious, powerful, irresistible, capable of transforming everything at a single stroke?"

Responding to those many questions, objections and offenses made to Jesus,

he often gave parables.

Second parable: The mustard seed (Mark 4:30-34)

This parable of the mustard seed is brief probably because Jesus compares the kingdom of God with something familiar to his listeners, something that happens every year before their eyes. Most likely Jesus is talking about "black mustard" whose seeds are very small. A grain of the seed weighs about 1 mg and has a diameter of 0.9 to 1.6 mm. However, it grows into a shrub with tree-like branches in one year. The average height of the plant is 1.5 m. By the Lake of Galilee it can even reach a height of 3 m.

This parable also speaks of the kingdom of God, but it does not compare the kingdom of God to a small mustard seed. The kingdom of God corresponds neither to the mustard seed nor to the grown mustard plant but to the entire process of its growth: It is not static but dynamic.

The kingdom of God is still so small and unnoticeable that people would pass by it. It looks ineffectual, but it grows, widens, grows stronger and stronger, and the birds of the air nest in its shade. The kingdom of God can be as small and invaluable as a mustard seed: Although the people of God is only a small flock, from the small beginning grows something new: a kingdom, a new universal society.

The kingdom of God has nothing to do with the imperial pretensions of the rulers of that time. Instead Jesus says to his disciples: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as 'Benefactors'; but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant" (Luke 22:25-26).

The parable takes place in a sober and real vegetable field or in agricultural affairs. The beginning of the parable is the most ordinary and common, everyday example. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the cultivation of vegetables and greenery. He speaks of a vegetable in a field, which is effective for his

listeners.

When Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God, he chooses the images to use from what is familiar to his listeners in their ordinary world: The kingdom of God is not in the distance; it does not come in the midst of apocalyptic storms but in the way a mustard plant grows. It is already happening in the midst of his listeners. Whoever contemplates with faith what is happening through and around Jesus has already seen the kingdom of God: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see" (Luke 10:23).

Conclusion

The message emphasized by today's two parables is clear: the mysteries with contrast; one mystery of growth taking place thanks to the dynamism hidden in the seed itself and the other mystery of the small seed producing something great.

The kingdom of God, although it requires our collaboration, is above all a gift of the Lord, a grace that precedes man and his works.

Our strength may be small and look impotent in the face of the world's problems, but it does not fear obstacles if the strength of God is added to it, because the victory of the Lord is certain. It is the miracle of God's love that makes all the seeds scattered on earth germinate and grow.

And the experience of this miracle of love makes us optimistic, despite the difficulties, the sufferings and the evil we encounter. The seed sprouts and grows, nourished by God's love.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE).