

Sprouting seeds and divine deeds

11th Sunday of the Year — Cycle B – June 13, 2021

Readings: Ezek 17:22-24; 2 Cor 5:6-10; Mk 4:26-34

“I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree” (Ezek 17:24)

Prologue: Images of growth in the OT are applied to individuals like the godly person yielding fruit (Ps 1:3), or to rulers who are destroyed “scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown” (Isa 40:24) or to the nation of Israel: “the shoot I have planted” (Isa 60:21). In the NT, Jesus teaches deep truths using parables of seeds and growth—divine providence animates human effort to reap a rich harvest. The readings of today can be linked with this theme.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is part of the allegory of the ‘eagles and the vine’. In Ezekiel chapter 17, in the 21 verses that precede today’s passage, the ‘eagle’ is King Nebuchadnezzar who attacked Judah and deported Jehoiachin, the last Davidic king, and his people to Babylon. Prophet Ezekiel—a priest of the temple of Jerusalem until the year 597 BC—was also one of the exiles. During Exile, on the one hand, Ezekiel denounced the sins of his people, which resulted in their being taken into captivity, and on the other, he also gave them hope and encouragement. In today’s passage, God makes a promise “to take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar ... I myself will plant it ... in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar” (vv.22-23a). The ‘sprig’ is a descendent of David and the ‘cedar’ is symbolic of David’s kingdom, which God promises to restore after the Exile. The birds and winged creatures that will nest in its branches (v.23b) represent the nations of the earth. This prophecy indicates that the Davidic kingdom will be more than mere restoration of the status quo before the Exile. Indeed, it refers to the full realization of the messianic kingdom. Ezekiel also predicts that God will: “bring low the high tree ... make high the low tree; dry up the green tree ... and make the dry tree flourish” (v.24). Mary of Nazareth will echo this prophesy in her ‘Magnificat’ of God who “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Lk 1:52) and Jesus will proclaim its sprouting in seminal form in the kingdom of God, which he will explain using parables of seeds, shoots and growth.
2. Jesus’ parables about God, life and the sprouting of God’s reign are both easy to understand, and difficult, too. This is because the noncommittal hearer will merely grasp the obvious meaning of the parable, which deals with the visible, material and physical aspects. However, disciples devoted to Jesus who seek depth in life become aware of deeper spiritual meanings that call for tough choices and daring commitment. Jesus explained parables to this latter group “in private” too (v.34). The first parable is of the seed growing gradually and secretly (vv.26-29). This is peculiar to the gospel according to Mark. The contrast between the apparent inactivity of the sower and the certainty of God-gifted harvest is striking. All that the sower can do is to sow; then, trusting in God’s action upon the buried seed, the sower carefully observes its’ growth in stages: “The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (v.28). This mysterious process of growth is from within the bosom of mother earth. Neither can anyone manipulate the process nor hurry it up. One has only to wait, be aware and grateful. Jesus is the sower of God’s kingdom—its’ seeds taking root and bearing fruit with God’s initiative and in God’s time. Jesus probably directed

this parable towards violent groups like the zealots who advocated armed revolt against the Roman powers and impatiently and immediately wanted to turn things around.

3. The parable of the mustard seed (vv.30-32) – like the first – also speaks of growth, with the added stress that the enormity of the tree so strikingly contrasts with the insignificance and smallness of the seed. The seed symbolizes the insignificant beginnings of Jesus’ ministry, while the huge tree suggests the final cosmic event of the fulfillment of God’s kingdom. The mention that “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” immediately remind one of the first reading (Ezek 17:23) that uses similar imagery. The only difference between the two parables, then, is that the first emphasizes that the sower can do nothing to produce or hasten the growth, while the second stresses the contrast between the small beginnings and the overwhelming final consummation. Jesus probably intended his disciples to realize that neither the end-result nor its’ enormity would depend on them but on God alone. Insignificant though they were, God would use them as instruments to bring about unimaginable results. It was their duty but to trust, cooperate and surrender.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme of Growth:

Paul sees his life and the life of his people as moving heavenwards as per God’s plan revealed in Jesus Christ. By “being at home in the body” (v.6) he refers to this earthly life as compared to being “at home with the Lord” (v.8), meaning, in heaven. He cautions Christians about an “as you sow, so shall you reap” principle operative in life. At the end of our life, we must “appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (v.10) to receive our reward or our punishment. In line with our theme, note that Paul, like Jesus, also uses the language of sowing and seeds – “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6), and “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable” (1 Cor 15:42).

Pope Francis’ Angelus Message on Sunday, June 14, 2015: “An important lesson comes to us from these two parables: God’s Kingdom requires *our cooperation*, but it is above all the *initiative and gift of the Lord*. Our weak effort, seemingly small before the complexity of the problems of the world, when integrated with God’s effort, fears no difficulty. The victory of the Lord is certain: *his love will make every seed of goodness present on the ground sprout and grow*. This opens us up to trust and hope, despite the tragedies, the injustices, the sufferings that we encounter. The seed of goodness and peace sprouts and develops, because the merciful love of God makes it ripen. ... May the Holy Virgin, who like ‘fertile ground’ received the seed of the divine Word, sustain us in this hope which never disappoints.”

Learning from Mother Earth: Chinese bamboo seeds are amazing. The seeds lie buried in the soil for 5 years before any shoots appear above the ground. But, after continuously watering the ground and putting manure on it, in just 6 weeks the bamboo plant grows to a height of around 90 feet. Botanists say that, unseen and unknown, the seeds germinate and develop strong roots that eventually break out and produce tall bamboos. So, it is with the reign of God.

In Lighter Vein: The rich lawyer, whose wife was a doctor, was very keen that his two children grow up to be like him and his wife. He would use every opportunity to drill that into his kids. A friend once asked him: “How old are your children?” Pat came the reply: “The doctor is seven years old and the lawyer is six.” Alas! We often fail to realize that growth is a slow process that is activated from within and can never be manipulated from without.
