**ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**13th June 2021**

**First Reading Ezekiel 17:22-24**

The northern reaches of Israel were mountainous with tall cedars with nesting eagles and beyond the mountains were Israel’s enemies. In the section that leads up to our reading (17;1-10) Ezekiel uses an eagle as an allegory of Nebuchadnezzar as he took King Jehoiachin into exile and installed King Zedekiah as a puppet-vassal in 597 B. C. But Zedekiah violated his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and looked to Babylon’s enemy, Egypt, for support. Ezekiel warns Zedekiah that his punishment will be defeat and deportation (vv. 16, 20-21).

So this was the setting for today's reading in which Yahweh promises that he will plant on *‘the highest mountain in Israel’* a shoot from the top of the cedar (v. 22). By *the highest mountain*, Ezekiel means Jerusalem. (It was not the highest by a long way, but altimeters were still to be invented and it was by far the most important) Ezekiel is hoping that God will raise up a Messiah from the descendants of Jehoiachin.

It must have seemed to his contemporaries that the transplanted shoot could only shrivel and die. But that would be to ignore the protective power of God, the God who puts down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly, the God who destroys mighty kings and nations (*'the green tree'*) and raises up the weak (*'the withered tree'*). It was this notion that Jesus’ mother incorporated in her Magnificat (Luke 1;51-53)

The God of Israel would return the exiled people of Israel to the land of their fathers. There would be a Messianic age and a new Davidic dynasty - the *'noble cedar*' offering shelter to *every kind of bird*. The nations of the earth (*'every tree of the field'*) would recognize the work of God in history. These phrases indicate a kind of universalism, which the Church saw fulfilled in itself. Sadly, the immediate restoration did not happen as soon as Ezekiel had hoped and was only fulfilled 500 years later by a later son of David whose kingdom would be universal.

The growth of the magnificent cedar in Ezekiel provides a contrast with Jesus’ image of the smallest of all seeds from which grows the mustard bush in the gospel reading.

**Responsorial Psalm: 92:1-2, 12-15**

This psalm is used today because it mentions the Cedars of Lebanon on the northern borders of Israel. They were legendary for their height, strength and colour. They were used in the construction of Solomon’s Temple, (see I Kings 5-6) for ceiling joists and panelling. The psalm may be from an eyewitness because verse 2 and the first two lines of verse 3 in the Missal likens them to the worshippers there. To-day only 17 square kilometres of cedars remain, in scattered groves under conservation orders.

**Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:6-10**

In the letters of his middle period, (c. 58 A.D?) Paul is coming to take seriously the possibility of his own death before the expected return of Christ in Judgement (Parousia). Paul is saying that Christians should look forward to leaving this world for the next, because it will bring them nearer to the Lord.

This is strikingly like Philippians 1:23 which dates from about the same time (c. 56/7 A.D.) where he says '*My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better*.' Still, in his present exile, Paul is steadfastly 'confident.' His one and only object is to please the Lord. Again note the same thought in Philippians. Though his ardent desire was to be with the Lord he declares: '*To remain in the flesh is more necessary for you*' (Philippians 1:24) - in other words, he is pleasing the Lord. That is why he has no fear of appearing before Christ.

But, we should not be selfishly looking to our own happiness, because we still have work to complete before that can be completed. This hope of resurrection is not just a dreaming about a better world than this one ("pie in the sky when I die") but provides a powerful motivation for life now—to please the Lord.

There was a widespread assumption that there would be some sort of reckoning after death based on life before it. Christians were advised to look forward to this moment which would be to their advantage, but not to take too much for granted.

This belief in a judgment based on our works is not a hangover from Paul's earlier Judaism, nor is it inconsistent with his message of justification by faith and grace alone. Faith must, if it is genuine, work in love. We are still responsible for our sins and failures even if our good works are the work of the Spirit.

**Gospel Mark 4:26-34**

In the Gospel passage we have two of Jesus’ parables, the seed growing to harvest (26-29) and the mustard seed (30-32) followed by a fascinating comment on Jesus’ use of parables.

Jewish Rabbis had a long tradition of teaching through parables. It is important to note that a parable is a metaphor, and not an allegory. An allegory has many symbolic details which provide as many meanings. A metaphor has one unambiguous point as plain as a pikestaff (whatever that is). We should not try to draw from it additional meanings that it was never meant to bear.

The first parable illustrates the hiddenness of the Kingdom. Its growth happens invisibly like seed without any work from the farmer. The second contrasts the Kingdom’s small beginnings with a few disciples with the international multicultural Church of Mark’s day.

The Church had expanded into a world dominated by Greek philosophy. Now this had a long and widespread tradition of teaching through allegory, in which each point in a story had a symbolic meaning. Consequently an allegory required a greater understanding and imagination. The clearest examples in the New Testament, of course, come in John’s Apocalypse.

So, like other people raised in Greek culture, Christians were familiar with allegories and found hidden meanings in Jesus’ parables which he had never intended. Perhaps the parable to suffer most from allegorising is that of the ‘Good Samaritan’ where every detail was found to have a hidden meaning. Such a practice has proved divisive as speculative meanings may be unjustly ascribed to Jesus.

Mark’s comment in the last paragraph in the Missal is revealing, because it is evidence of this practice in the Church of his day.

The parable of the seed growing to harvest (26-29) is peculiar to Mark. It seems best to take it as a parable of contrast between the inactivity of the sower and the certainty of the harvest. The sower goes his way; the seed sprouts and grows without his taking anxious thought. It is God who brings about the growth of the Kingdom. Paul had learned the lesson of the parable: 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth' (1 Corinthians 3:6).

The parable of the mustard seed (30-32) is another parable of contrast; but again the idea of growth must be given due weight. The contrast between insignificant beginning and mighty achievement is primary - but the seed does grow into a plant. The detail of branches in which the birds of the air nest (v. 32) recalls the Ezekiel reading. What is striking however is the fact that the Cedar is the most massive of plants, sheltering the largest of birds, while the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, providing shelter for the smallest of birds.

In Mark's view, the proclamation of the kingdom will bring all nations within its scope. The parable could have been the reply of Jesus to an objection, latent or expressed: could the kingdom really come from such inauspicious beginnings? His reply is that the little cell of disciples will indeed become a kingdom.

And, in the last analysis, if the kingdom does reach its full dimension, that is not due to any virtue in the men and women who are the seed of the kingdom; the growth is due solely to the power of God. That is why Jesus can speak with utter confidence of the final stage of the kingdom. And that is why the parable is a call for patience.

These parables would have been given on two different occasions and we do not know who Jesus was addressing, when he gave them. There are two possibilities. It may be that, originally, it was Jesus' reply to those who looked, impatiently, for a forceful intervention of God in the world.

Or it may have been meant to give assurance to those of the disciples who were discouraged because nothing seemed to be happening. Mark, at least, takes it in the latter sense. Jesus encourages his disciples: in spite of hindrance and apathy the seed was being sown. Its growth is the work of God who will bring it to harvest. It strikes me that this is no less relevant to our situation two millennia later.