



11th Sunday of Ordinary Time - June 13, 2021

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God?"

Reading I: Ezekiel 17: 22-24

It shall put forth branches and bear fruit.

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

Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.

Reading II: 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10

We walk by faith, not by sight.

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

He spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it.

Reading 1: The Allegory of the Cedar **Twig**

Q: How do you explain politics in this crazy world of ours?

We live in a media saturated world. News and opinion come at us 24/7 through radio, cable news and the internet. With all this information, all these voices, all these points of view, how can we make sense of the world, much less explain it to others. One simple way is the use of the allegory. "Our current situation is like a..."

Ezekiel used an agricultural allegory to explain his country's politics. Throughout chapter 17, he employed the image of the eagle and the cedar to explain Judea's plight when the Babylonians took the leading families of the nation into exile. In the allegory, Nebuchadnezzar was an eagle (17:3) who plucked the topmost branch of the tall cedar (King Jehoiachin in 17:4); the Babylonian king appointed the uncle of Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, as governor. The seeds of the appointment (17:5) grew into a vine that first reached out to the Babylonians, then to Egypt (17:6-8). For this duplicity, Ezekiel foresaw doom for Zedekiah and the nation (destroying the vine), for the prophet considered the covenant between Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar as binding as the one between God and Israel (17:12-21).

Verses 17:22-24 represented a new vision for Israel, a new line of kings (a tender one among the young shoots in 17:22) that YHWH would establish (plant it on a high mountain which represents Zion in Jerusalem). For Ezekiel, the fate of the royal lines was God's prerogative, for he would exalt the lowly and topple the arrogant (dry up the green tree), even prosper the powerless (make the dry tree flourish; 17:24). The prophet saw the nation and the world in the hands of YHWH.

Allegories like the one Ezekiel employed are useful, but we must be careful not to abuse them, for they can explain to some, but confuse others. If we use them wisely, they can make a complex situation clear. Allegories, after all, are word pictures.

Q: Which allegory, analogy or metaphor is your favorite to explain God activity in your life? Why?

Psalm: Good vs. Bad

Q: Who do you know that has a high moral character? How does that person compare to others?

There are good people, then there are...you get the point. Some we admire for their morals; others we admire for their fortitude. Some are



role models because they live out their faith; others we admire for trying to live out their faith. Of course, we don't admire the person who doesn't try or who doesn't care to live the moral life.

It's too easy to use a broad brush to separate the good from the bad, the virtuous from the evil; we shouldn't, but we all do it. That attitude did make its way into Scripture, especially Psalm 92.

Psalm 92 was not so much a hymn of praise, but a statement of the faithful against the faithless. More to the point, the song pitted the king (or high priest/governor under a foreign power) loyal to YHWH against the person who denied it's God. The psalm can be divided into three sections: the context for praise, the juxtaposition of YHWH with the person who denied him and the character of the faithful.

While the place of praise in 92:1-3 was not mentioned, singing praise for the covenant ("loving kindness" and "faithfulness") twice daily echoed to the morning and evening sacrifices offered in the Temple (Numbers 28:3-4). The author penned the hymn in the tradition of King David who praised God with lute and harp (1 Sam. 16:23). So, liturgy set the stage for the rest of the psalm.

92:4-6 gave the reason for praise: YHWH gave the king or chief priest/governor victory over his foes. The ruler saw this victory as God's will, and he praises the divine for his providence and wisdom ("great works...deep thoughts"). Faithfulness in these verses opposed the faithlessness in 92:6-7, 9. The faithless were "senseless" and "fools." Their plans were temporary; their place in society and their political influence did not last. Notice the author aligned himself and his fate with that of YHWH's. It was he and God vs. the wicked; his enemy was God's enemy. God would raise up the ruler; his place would be affirmed ("exalted my horn"), his office would be renewed

("anointed with fresh oil"), he would see enemies defeated.

92:12-15 shifted away from the wicked to the character of the righteous in a series of metaphors. Like YHWH, they will stand firm (like "the palm tree" in a sand storm stands erect; 92:12a). They will worship frequently in the presence of God at the Temple, like the cedars of Lebanon that supported the Temple, "planted" in God's house, flourishing in the Temple courts (92:12b-13). As a result, they will still live an ethical and pious life even into old age, as a way to give praise to God (9:14-15a). The psalm ended with a statement of faith; God is solid, like a rock, so his character is true (92:15).

The good vs. the bad. Yes, there are those we admire for the virtue, others we revile for their vice. We should remember, however, that both virtue and vice are not a destination but a process. We have virtues and vices only to the extent that we do them. But, they do have an effect on our character and outlook. The virtuous are dependable, tested and firm; the evil scatter to the winds. The truly virtuous realize they cannot practice virtue alone, however. They need God. He is the one who strengthens, he is the one who defeats enemies, he is the one who helps us to live moral lives even into old age.

How has God strengthened you in your moral life? How have you leaned on him to help you overcome your moral faults?

Reading 2: Courage in the Face of Death

Q: Do you fear death?

When I reflect on my own mortality, I do have my doubts. Death (or I should say, the prospect of death) inspires dread, for many see death as a dark, lonely end to life. St. Paul, however, had a different view, for truly believed he would not die alone. He had an eternal friend in Christ. We



Christians, like Paul, view death as a transition from one type of existence to another; through the transition, we have an intimate companion, Jesus. Of course, this view only comes with faith (5:7).

With this insight, we can now understand Paul's boast. He and his fellow missionaries had courage, simply because death meant life with Christ. Life here meant evangelization; life after death meant divine union (5:6-8). The goal of the follower was to please the Master, for soon all would stand before him to be judged (5:9-10). In such a situation, wouldn't everyone want the judge as a friend? Wouldn't the prospect of such a friend give one courage in the face of death?

As the old song goes, "We have a friend in Jesus." Indeed, a friend to the end (and beyond!).

Lean on your friend Jesus today. Lay any fear of death at his feet.

Gospel: A Picture Tells a Thousand Stories

Q: Are you "visually oriented?" How does this orientation affect the language you use?

How many times have you told someone, "If you could only see it, you would understand"? Pictures do simplify explanations. Word images do the same thing. They make the difficult easy to communicate.

Jesus understood this principle well when he told the people about the Kingdom of God. He publicly preached in parables

These verses from Mark can be divided into three parts: the parable of the farmer sowing seeds, the parable of the mustard seed and the public/private modes of Jesus' teaching.

4:27 "On its own" is literally "automatos" in Greek, the root word for "automatic."

In the first parable Jesus proposed and agricultural analogy that was familiar with his audience. At the time, farmers carefully planted grain and tended their fields to maximize yield. Yet, nature produced the plants; farmers only cooperated with creation for their plants. In the end, farmers harvested the grain when the time was right. How does this analogy reveal the Kingdom? The active agent in the analogy and in the Kingdom is God. Humanity is simply a co-worker. God created the conditions for the harvest, the worker (i.e., missionary) who sowed the seeds then brought the harvest in. Notice the two parts the farmer/missionary played. He spread the seed (the word of God) and participated in the harvest at the end. Indeed, if the appearance of Christ in the Incarnation and at the crucifixion revealed the end times, the missionary/evangelist was to extend the Messianic mission of bringing all back to God for the Final Judgment. Of course, those who willingly participated in this "gathering" were saved; those who rejected the call were the "lost."

Like many other parables, this analogy spoke to the end times. The farmer/missionary spread the Word. In doing so, he or she helped Christ bring back all to God. So, the Christian missionary was actually the Christian eschatologist. The missionary was a minister for the Final Days. Yet, his/her job was secondary. God was in charge; he was doing the "heavy lifting" to fulfill his will.

4:31 "mustard seed." Mustard grew wild in Palestine at the time of Jesus. It was an annual plant that grew as high as ten to twelve feet.

In his second parable, Jesus changed the focus from the end times to the humble beginnings of the Kingdom. The reign of God would not arrive to thunderous applause. In fact, like the small mustard seed, its coming would not be considered a major event.



The Incarnation was not announced with great fanfare. Matthew and Luke placed the coming of the Messiah in the humblest of origins. Mark simply began his gospel with the appearance of Jesus as an adult. While John had a poetic prologue to the Divine Word, he followed Mark's lead; Jesus appeared as an adult, ready to teach and heal. Despite the angelic narratives, the Christian Messiah would have roots that easily overlooked.

However, the end of the process that began with the Incarnation would be huge. A small Jewish cult would become large enough to be considered a threat to the local order. Within three hundred years, the Roman Emperor would initiate an empire-wide persecution against the followers of the Nazarene.

Why did Jesus use parables in his public ministry? Jesus used parables for two reasons: to deflect criticism and to teach effectively. By speaking in analogies and stories, Jesus was able to communicate to his audience without providing a clear reason for the Roman authorities to move against him. If Jesus equated the Kingdom of God with revolution, he would have been quickly arrested, tried and executed. But, by teachings in symbols and stories, he was able to deflect charges of treason. (How many Romans could really understand the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed, anyway?)

More important, stories and analogies are superior didactic tools. What do you remember best: a process, a principle or a story? Narrative forms create opportune conditions to communicate a moral. Think of an effective television commercial. Most likely, the commercial tells a story and ties the moral of the story directly to the product and/or product feature. Jesus and his followers used this form to pass along the faith.

Over time, of course, the interpretations of many parables changed to meet the needs of the audience. But, that did not diminish the power

of the narrative. So, the next time you hear a sermon, critique the speech. If you remember the thoughts presented, most likely they were tied to a story that caught your attention.

Q: What is your favorite parable in the gospel? How do these parables help reflect on the Kingdom?

Jesus painted word pictures with symbols and stories. He understood the power of the narrative. A picture might tell a thousand stories, but a word picture can help express the Kingdom.

Q: What story or symbol could you create to express your faith? Get creative.