

## **ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B**

**June 17, 2018**

*First Reading – Ezekiel 17:22-24*

*Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 92*

*Second Reading – Corinthians 5:6-10*

*Gospel – Mark 4:26-34*

**My dear people of God:**

**In order to grasp more profoundly the deep meaning of the first reading, let us consider first the author: the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a man of God for his own time, surely at the beginning of and during the exile of Israel to Babylon in the early decades of the sixth century BCE. We are reading Ezekiel who was reacting to the end of Israel as he knew it, or as he perceived it. Israel was facing an uncertain future, its leaders were leaning towards the world's greatest city, mighty Babylon.**

**Please know that before our reading today, chapter 17, verses 22 to 24, Ezekiel offered two poems in verses 3 to 6, and in verses 7 to 8. Let us enhance our imagination so that we can somehow relate with these allegories.**

**The poems described two great eagles: (1) the first eagle broke off the topmost shoot of an enormous cedar tree - one of the fabled cedars of Lebanon; the eagle carried the shoot to a "city of merchants." That eagle then took a seed and planted it in fertile soil where it sprouted as a "low-spreading vine," rooted and fixed in that soil (Ezekiel 17:3-6).**

(2) the second eagle saw that the spreading vine of the first eagle has turned toward him. It has, in fact, been transplanted into "good soil by abundant waters," where the second eagle hoped it would become a "noble vine," bearing much fruit (Ezekiel 17:7-8).

Then, in verse 9, God asked: "*Will the vine prosper?*" The answer was NO. This so called *good vine will be pulled up by its roots, its fruit will rot and wither. The transplanted vine will not thrive either; it too will wither right at its place of transplantation* (Ezekiel 17:9-10).

The prophet then explained the allegory for his readers in verses 11 to 21.

The historical background is clear: the king of Babylon (the first eagle) comes first to Lebanon (Jerusalem). He takes the top shoot of the cedar (Jehoiachin, king of Jerusalem) and brings him to "the land of trade" (Babylon). Next, the king takes the "seed" of the land-Zedekiah, the last king of Israel and a Babylonian puppet, and places him in "fertile soil, near abundant waters" (Babylon). There, he becomes a "low spreading vine," a vassal to the power of Babylon.

The second eagle (the pharaoh of Egypt) then redirects the vine of Israel toward his land, transplanting the vine to Egypt. He offers Israel military support against Babylon, again in "good soil by abundant waters," this time the Nile.

This refers to Zedekiah's revolt against his Babylonian masters with the connivance of Egypt early in the second decade of the sixth century BCE. The result was a huge disaster.

Furious and eager for revenge against the treacherous vassal, Babylon returns to Jerusalem, destroys the city, and drags its leaders, including Zedekiah, off to exile in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar orders the sons of Zedekiah to be slain before the very eyes of the Israelite king, just before Zedekiah is blinded. That way, the memory of his murdered sons will follow him vividly to his exilic grave.

My dear people of God, after hearing the background, we are ready to see the depth of the first reading. In the face of such misery and death, we have a new appreciation of the first reading: strong and mighty eagles (that is, world leaders) are no longer the active agents; Yahweh, the Lord God will NOW act. God will take another twig from the topmost cedar and will plant the twig on a "high and lofty mountain, a mountain of Israel." The twig itself will bear fruit and will grow into a mighty cedar. Under the shade of this huge tree and in its vast network of branches, *"every kind of bird will live"* and *"winged creatures of every kind"* will find their place of safety (Ezekiel 17:22-23). We realize from the first reading that God fights for us as He did for them.

Now, let us go to the Second Reading. In this passage, the apostle Paul expresses hope in the promise of resurrection. Paul is telling the Corinthians in his second letter (2 Cor 5:6-8), and is telling us now that we have the abundant hope that God will raise our bodies. Our perishable body will be changed into an imperishable body. God will ultimately defeat death, and when that occurs, mortality will no longer have dominion over our body. In his first letter to the same Corinthian community, Paul already wrote that *God will give us victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 15:57).

The expression *"to be at home with the Lord"* as Paul mentioned in verse 6, expresses his hope (and ours too) of being with the Lord after death. Paul offers us the courage and never to fear death and go home to the Lord. He strongly tells us that we will receive recompense from God according to our deeds. Brothers and sisters, we know that God desires our salvation. Let us aim at

going home to the Lord by living holy lives. We all want to receive our reward.

And now, let us go to the Gospel. It would be interesting to note that this is the only parable unique to the Gospel of Mark. The other three evangelists do not mention it.

Sowing seeds does not require a lot of brains. The sower sleeps and rises night and day. The point of Jesus here is that the inherent character of these seeds make them grow. The hard-working farmer (who waters and fertilizes the crops, and who weeds the crops between planting time and harvest time) does not know how the seed germinates and grows to maturity.

The sense of the word “*by itself*” is that the seed grows because of an inner force which the farmer didn’t give it; a life-force intrinsic to the plant (Mark 4: 27); a life force put there by God. “*The earth bears fruit*” only because God has made such a thing possible.

Seeds have power. The small seedling which becomes a tree with huge roots can crack great rocks. The seedlings can grow into plants that provide food and shelter for animals. Plants can make human life possible.

Jesus is telling us that the growth of the plant is not the result of the work of the farmer but the work of the seed, which obtains its growth from a mysterious source and grows so slowly that we cannot see it growing. This analogy is futuristic. The kingdom of God grows slowly but steadily. Results are simply ordinary. You and I have observed the following in our parish:

(1) Fewer and fewer families are coming to Mass nowadays, yet, from time to time, there are children who attentively listen to the sermon; this gives me joy to no end.

(2) Fewer and fewer teens come to Mass, yet from time to time, a teenager presents himself for RCIA and for confirmation; this amazes me to no end.

(3) Fewer and fewer young couples choose to be married in the church; yet from time to time, there is one couple who would come to the parish office and request for a Catholic wedding; this inspires me to no end.

The point here is not the kingdom's mystery but its dependability. Just as we can count on the earth to produce great plants from small seeds, so also we can count on God to bring about A GREAT KINGDOM.

So also it is with the kingdom of God. We do our part by proclaiming the Gospel, but it is by the power of God that the kingdom grows. God chooses us to become proclaimers despite our inadequacies. He did that before. Christ did not choose the brightest and the best to be His disciples, but instead He chose ordinary people; fishermen, and even a tax collector. God can make His Kingdom great even if it started from twelve simple apostles, just like the small mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds.

The kingdom of God has its beginnings in small, barely visible, seemingly inconsequential incidents.

*With many such parables He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. Without a parable He didn't speak to them; but privately to His own disciples he explained everything.* Why privately? Because He fully revealed the truth only to the insiders, His disciples.

I want you, my dear brothers and sisters, to realize that Jesus divided His listeners into (1) outsiders, for whom the parables remained veiled, and (2) insiders, who were privileged to receive private explanation. The understanding/comprehension of these

**insiders may have been incomplete until after the resurrection. But we know now that their efforts to spread the gospel produced great fruits. Why? Because those efforts stemmed from their great love, despite little/inadequate understanding.**

**How are we then, to appreciate today's readings? My dear people of God; let us thank the Lord for having made us members of His Church. He allowed us to take shelter under His Church as we heard from the First Reading and from the Gospel. And we all are candidates of heaven, our permanent home, where our bodies will become glorified bodies as Paul taught us in the Second Reading.**

**Let us then continue becoming missionary disciples, so that others can come into God's church and so that they will also enjoy the bliss of heaven. Amen.**