

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 16 June 2024 + Ez 17 + II Cor 5:6-10 + Mk 4:26-34

In our Gospel today, we are presented with two brief parables. It can be tempting to think of the parables as just nice little stories, such as those that we tell children. And yet we have to remember that one of the reasons why Jesus was murdered by crucifixion was because the people thought his teachings were subversive, even dangerous. So parables are not just nice fables. Even more, parables are purposefully mysterious. Jesus never did anything without reason and purpose. So the parables are purposefully mysterious because they are meant to draw the listener into a deeper reality, which is also a mystery.

And what is that mystery at the heart of the parables? Well, at each Mass, immediately after the consecration of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, we proclaim the “*Mystery of faith*”; that is, we proclaim—or give voice to the mystery that has just occurred on the altar. Remember, the Latin word *sacramentum* means “mystery.” There are three options for this proclamation, but they all have one common theme: the *death of the Lord*. Now that is very strange when you think about it: why would we proclaim, joyfully, the *death* of Lord?! For instance, I’ve always heard that it was as if the whole nation mourned when JFK was assassinated. Now, considering the fact that Jesus is more than just a president, we quickly see just how strange this proclamation is! But the truth is, that the mystery of the death of our Lord on the Cross is *exactly* the mystery that today’s parables are meant to help us to understand.

How so? Well, in the first parable in our Gospel today, we hear that the Kingdom of God is the seed which is sown, takes root, grows, and is finally harvested. Now the crowds couldn’t have possibly understood it at that time, but *Jesus himself* is that seed. *He is* the Kingdom of God, in the flesh. He was born, far from the crowds, in tiny Bethlehem. His childhood was largely hidden from the world. Only when He attained manhood, did he begin to bear noticeable fruit. But in fact He was already bringing about the Kingdom from the moment of His incarnation. And unbeknownst to the crowds, very soon, in the prime of His life and ministry, He will be cut down, like the grain at harvest time.

In the same way, Jesus is also the mustard seed in the second parable. He appeared to be a seemingly ordinary man when he walked among the crowds. And yet, when he was *sown in the ground*, that is, after his death and burial in the tomb for 3 days, he will *spring up* and become *the largest of plants*. Here we speak of His Body, the Church, born from His pierced side, which would grow and take root for some 2,000 years now, becoming the universal source of life, nourishment, and rest for all of mankind.

Now as I said, the crowds could not have understood all of this at that time. They could grasp the agricultural images, but they couldn’t have understood the full meaning. And St. Mark notes that Jesus did not explain the parables to the crowds, but only to the disciples, in private. So why did Jesus keep this knowledge of the kingdom hidden?

Well, many explanations can be given, but St. Paul hints at one of the reasons in our 2nd reading today. That is, as disciples of Jesus, we are called to *walk by faith, not by sight*. In other words, Jesus wanted the people to come to Him not just by compelling arguments or by wondrous signs, but above all, He wanted them to come to Him by *faith*.

And here we come to two great paradoxes of our faith. First, *it takes a little faith to have big faith!* Meaning, only once a person makes a step forward in faith, will their faith begin to grow. It's kind of like riding an electric bike. You still have to push down on the pedal and make the first effort. But as you do so, you feel the e-assist take over and you are off! It seems to me that this is how God usually works. We have to open the door, even just a little, and He will flood us with His grace. But if we keep the door of our hearts firmly locked, He won't break it down. He respects our freedom, even to use it in a tragic way.

Once we choose to put our faith in Jesus, He slowly but surely gives us the gift of spiritual insight, which is really just the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our faith in Him will grow deeper. And that is the key: we need to always be growing deeper in Him. But if we refuse to open our hearts to Him more and more, and just choose to hang out on the surface, we will never move. If you never give God the chance to prove Himself to you, by entrusting your lives to Him: which includes everything: your desires, finances, health, fertility, marriage, family, your future—you will never have the joy that comes from knowing that He is real, that His words are true, and that nothing else but Him will ever truly satisfy your desires.

The second great paradox of our faith is the Cross. On the Cross, what seems to be the worst possible fate, the most unjust action possible—the death of the only sinless man—becomes the supreme moment of our salvation. In fact, as these parables show us, Jesus' teachings are incomplete without the Cross (and the Cross is incomplete without the resurrection). Without this, Jesus would have been perhaps a gifted teacher and a nice guy, but He would not have been the *Lord*. And yet if He had never spoken a word, if all we knew of the Lord was His death on the Cross, this would be, for us at least, just another meaningless death. The teachings of Christ, including the parables, are unlocked by the Cross. And the Cross is explained by His teachings. And we understand all this by faith.

Only after Jesus had died on the Cross and the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, could the crowds have realized, "*oh, so that's what Jesus was talking about!*" That Jesus was the seed sown in order to yield the abundant fruit of redeemed humanity. And only when Jesus had risen from the dead, could the crowds have understood that He Himself was the mustard seed sown in the ground of the tomb, which would spring up to become a mighty tree of new and abundant life, for all who would come to Him in faith. Throughout our lives, we sometimes doubt this. Sometimes all we see around us seems to be barren fields and diseased trees. But the Kingdom is always there, still growing, silently but surely. And someday in heaven we will see it all, if only we keep the faith.