

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 11TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Ezekiel 17: 22-24 Psalm 92 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10 Mark 4: 26-34

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Gospel has two parables in it and caution flags must be raised for the preacher. We need to remember what parables are not before we begin interpreting them. The first tendency we have when we read a parable is to make it into an allegory; so, for example, we try to figure what the "seed" represents, what the "ground" is and who the farmer might be. Parables are not allegories even though sometimes in the Scriptures a parable is "explained" later by Christ. Such moments are the exception. When Jesus "explains" the parable, it is probably a case of the Gospel writer adding a later interpretation suited for his own community and its particular needs.

Mostly, the parables are not explained in the Gospels because they are stories. Frequently they are introduced as today's are, with Jesus', "This is how it is with the reign of God." In other words, Jesus is trying to describe for us what it's like when God is in control of things, or what it's like when people are living under God's rule. That's what the parables hold for us today, a way of seeing our lives through another lens, through the lens of the parable. We have our own ways of measuring our lives, we have standards of "success" influenced by our environment, upbringing and education. But these ways of seeing might even be in opposition to the way Jesus would have us look at things. The parables reveal Jesus' perspective, and his followers need to give them a listening.

Another approach or tendency we have when we read parables is to moralize about them, to see them as instructions for how we should behave. A better way to think of them, is that they are descriptions of how God behaves and clues for how and where to find God in our lives. Chapter 4, from which these parables were taken, begins with a huge crowd gathering to hear Jesus. The crowd is so large that Jesus gets into a boat to speak to them in parables and says to them, "Listen carefully to this." (4:3) That's the disposition we need today, to "listen carefully to this."

The chapter opening says that Jesus spoke these parables to a large crowd and the end of today's section says he kept explaining things to his disciples privately. Jesus' offer was to anyone who had ears to hear, but not everyone got his message,

in fact, it seems that only a few did. The parables demand a great deal from us who listen, most basically, they require an attachment to Jesus, an ability to trust his words and wisdom despite the immediate appearances. To understand the parables seems to require a previous tie to Jesus through faith in him.

To those who really heard him Jesus seems to be saying in these two parables that the great enterprise of God, has begun in Jesus— but in small, almost imperceptible ways. These two parables are called "transitional parables", i.e., something new is happening, and the old is passing away. God is entering the world. God's reign is breaking in. What kind offer will **it** have with its arrival? We, and Jesus' early followers (and the audience of the Gospel writers) might want a forceful beginning, a rapid overthrow of the world's powers, immediate signs of progress and triumph. All this would be very satisfying to us, after all, we who like to watch spooning events, upon coming in on a televised game, ask, "Who's winning?" As a nation, we pride ourselves on being winners. Our citizens demand that when we function as a nation that we get things done, quickly, expediently. We want the evil powers of the world overcome and are less patient with prolonged engagement. We do not like complex processes that take time, like peace-making.

We expect God, who is more powerful than any other power on earth, to also be efficient.

Certainly God has it within God's power to get things done. What's taking God so long? Why do we have to put up with so much for so long? Why aren't we seeing big results in the world and in our personal lives? Jesus is addressing these questions and our doubts in story form through these parables.

The first parable, the farmer who scatters seed and goes off, suggests that the beginnings of God's reign seem small and insignificant, like seed spread on the ground. Notice that the farmer does a minimum amount of labor, he scatters seed and then forgets about it till harvest time.

Anyone who has planted even a backyard garden knows that's not how a crop gets to grow to harvest. It takes a lot of work from us all along the process to get fruits from the earth. But that's not how this parable is told by the Teller of parables. This parable would frustrate workaholics like us and it is one we need to hear. There are plenty of Bible passages about how much we have to do; but here is one at least

that tells us there is another element at work in the reign of God, and it is a life force that will reach fruition even when we don't seem to have done enough to bring it about. This is a consoling parable when we look at the results of our efforts and wonder, "Just how effective am I?" This parable balances the tendency in us to measure our efforts and look for proportionate results. The parable seems to promise that despite our efforts and our failures and successes, there will be a harvest, it doesn't all depend on us. The first parable has no doubt in it. We can trust that while we are "scattering seed" there is set in motion an ineluctable force that will come to fruition.

Today is our Sabbath. The day has ancient roots in the Jewish faith, a day when all labors ceased and the Word of God was listened to, and God was praised. Maybe we need to acknowledge the Divine's interest in our good works and efforts. Maybe this Eucharist at least, might be a celebration of Sabbath rest. It could be our chance to renew our faith that God is part of our efforts, and in fact is in charge of them. We are not in charge. We know that because we get a parable about seed growing with minimal human involvement, except to scatter and later to reap a harvest. It's good to know it isn't all in our control; it's good to know another force is present, causing growth and invested in the results.

If you want to focus on the mustard seed parable: the preacher might invite people to call to mind those people who planted seeds in our lives that caused surprising results. They might be those who spoke words at a crucial time in our lives; those, who by their example were models throughout our lives; those who taught us in school and got us excited about a subject or vocation; those who taught us to pray, or have faith, etc. These examples certainly are our own parables of the mustard seed, a small planting, a few words or gestures that had an abundant harvest in our lives..

“Blessings on your preaching,”

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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