

The Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 17:22-24
<i>Response</i>	Lord, it is Good to Give Thanks to You
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 5:6-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower. All who come to him will live forever.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 4:26-34

The 11th Sunday of Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Mark for Year B. And this Sunday the church moves us into chapter 4 of Mark's gospel with a specific focus on what scholars sometimes refer to as the parables discourse of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. One of the unique things about Mark's gospel is, in contrast to say Matthew or Luke where you have lots of long speeches of Jesus, especially in Matthew like the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters of extensive teachings, Mark's gospel is more characterized by actions of Jesus and short speeches and there are really only two lengthy discourses in the Gospel of Mark. The first one is in Mark 4, the discourse on parables, and then the second one is in Mark 13, that's Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives, where he talks about the future and the end of the age and that kind of thing. Those are kind of like bookends to Jesus' public ministry in Mark's gospel. So this is a significant chapter. It's one of those chapters that's more focused on the words of Jesus than other parts of Mark's gospel, and in this chapter Jesus teaches in his characteristic mode of using parables. So the Sunday gospel for today focuses on two key parables of Jesus. First is the parable of what's commonly called the Seed Growing Secretly — but I'm just going to refer to it as the Parable of the Growing Seed — and then the second one is Jesus' most famous parable of all, the Parable of the Mustard Seed. So let's look at those two parables together and then we'll try to explain them and put them in context. So Mark 4:26-34, it reads as follows:

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.¹

Alright, so let's pause there for just a minute. Notice a couple of elements of this gospel text. I'll start with the end first. Mark states very clearly that Jesus' characteristic mode of discourse at this stage in his ministry is to teach in parables. He even goes so far as to say that this was the exclusive mode of Jesus' discourse when he was in Galilee, "He did not speak to them without a parable," meaning he only used parables and then in private he would explain to the disciples what the parables meant. So that second part of Mark's saying shows something significant about parables. Although nowadays it is commonly said that Jesus used parables so that everyone could understand them, the gospels say the opposite. The gospels depict the parables of Jesus as riddles that were in fact difficult to understand, as proverbs that needed someone to unpack them, that needed someone to explain them in order for their meaning to be made clear. And this is something particular to Mark's gospel, it's really important. It's not in the reading for today, but elsewhere Jesus is going to say at the beginning of this chapter, when the disciples ask him why do you speak in parables, Jesus is going to say because "to you has been given the mystery of the kingdom, but for those outside everything comes in parables." In other words, the parables are meant to function as riddles, right. They are meant to kind of draw you into the mystery of the kingdom by both revealing

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

some aspect of it, they are meant to teach something, but at the same time that they reveal, they also conceal. There's a mysterious element to all of the parables of Jesus and the same thing is true of the two parables for today's reading. So let's take a moment to look at each one of them.

The first parable there that we read was called the Parable of the Growing Seed or the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly. Now this is really important that this is in the lectionary because this parable is unique to Mark's gospel, kind of interesting there, it's only found in the Gospel of Mark. That's one of the reasons the church has put it in the lectionary. As we're walking through Mark's gospel she tries to highlight for us certain aspects of Mark's gospel that are unique and there aren't very many of them. So it's significant that this parable is put in the lectionary. Okay with that said, the parable is so short that it's kind of difficult to interpret exactly what the main meaning is, and you'll see this in the different names given to the parable. So the way people name this parable will also often reveal what they think the main point of the parable is. So for example, one common name is the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly. So obviously the people who name it that think that the main point of the parable is that the kingdom grows secretly. In other words, the way the kingdom spreads throughout the world is mysterious, just like the way a plant grows is mysterious. And you might think well wait, what's mysterious about a plant's growth? Plant a garden sometime and you'll see what I'm talking about here.

Anyone who has ever worked with agriculture or worked with trying to nurture a plant will notice that the growth of a plant — although there are certain things we know to do in order to foster the growth like fertilize it and water it — at the end of the day it's a mysterious process, right. As Jesus says, “the seed sprouts and grows, he knows not how, and the earth produces of itself.” So there's a real sense in which there's a power, there's a hidden power within the plant itself that is really beyond our control and beyond our complete ability to explain it. So some people think that's the main point of the parable, is that the kingdom is like a plant. As it spreads, as it grows throughout the world, it does so from an innate power which is invisible to us and which is in some sense incomprehensible to us; it goes beyond our ability to explain it. Think here for example of the historical fact that the Catholic Church today, which has over 1 billion members, began with 12 apostles, you know, from Galilee in the First Century. How did the church grow from 12

men from Galilee into over 1 billion strong throughout the world? It's kind of mysterious, right. there's some internal power that made it happen that we can't really see, it's a spiritual power. That's one way to interpret the parable.

Another name for the parable is the Parable of the Patient Farmer. In this case, interpreters put the emphasis not on the seed but on the farmer, right. So again if you've ever grown a garden or even more if you've planted trees, like if you've grown an orchard, patience is not just a virtue it is necessary, it's absolutely necessary. You just have to wait. You can't hurry things up when it comes to gardening or growing trees or growing an orchard or growing a field of wheat, which is probably what Jesus is envisioning here a crop of wheat. You have to wait. You have to be patient. So in this case Jesus is talking about it from this point of view, Jesus can be revealing to the apostles that they are going to have to be patient with the ministry of the kingdom. The kingdom is going to grow as it spreads throughout the world but it's not going to be like a lightning bolt that just all of a sudden the kingdom is present. It's going to be a process of growth and development that's going to take time, right.

And then finally, other scholars will call this the Parable of the Earth Producing of Itself. And there the emphasis is similar to the first interpretation which is that the kingdom grows of its own power, right. The kingdom is not something, at the end of the day, that we do. We can help spread the kingdom but ultimately it's something that has its origins in God and in God's activity. God is the author of the kingdom of God and therefore it's his power that's going to make it grow and spread throughout the world. In the same way that at the end of the day God is the author of nature and so although there are secondary earthly material causes that can, you know, that make plants grow and make trees grow, at the end of the day the primary cause of everything that is is God himself. So the power that makes all of creation flourish ultimately is the power of God, right. So those are just some different ways to interpret this first parable of the kingdom. And I think, for me at least, that the key that interprets and focuses on the heart is the verse, "he knows not how." I really think you could call this the Parable of the Seed that Grows Mysteriously. At the end of the day we just don't fully understand what life and what growth even are and how they all work in the natural world. There are mysteries of the natural world even to this day, I mean this is 2000 years ago, but we still don't fully comprehend all of the mysteries of the natural world, how much

more the mysteries of the kingdom. There's going to be things that take place that we can't fully comprehend, fully understand. There's an intrinsic mysterious element to the way the kingdom spreads. That's the first parable.

Now let's turn to the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the second parable. Now in this case most of us are very familiar with this parable. We hear it over and over again in the lectionary. And I think most people kind of appreciate the basic simple meaning of the parable which is that the kingdom starts out small like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of seeds, and then it ends up big, right. As Jesus says, "the mustard tree grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and the birds come to nest in its shade," right. So that the idea here is that the kingdom begins small and ends big, so big that many can come in and dwell within. And I think that's right, I think that's the basic meaning of the parable. Again, go back to my analogy just a minute ago of the small beginnings of the church, and then the contemporary largeness, so to speak, the contemporary multitudes that comprise the church in our day and time, say nothing of all those who have died and gone before us. That's a great mystery that the kingdom started so small and has become so big, in the sense that the church started so small and has become so big. I think that's right, but I think a lot more is actually going on here because just as it said at the verses we read earlier, people didn't understand what Jesus was saying and the apostles needed him to explain it. I think that's especially true of the mustard seed because if you read this parable through a first century Jewish lens it would be a very unexpected parable. There are a lot of surprises built into it that we kind of gloss over as contemporary Christians because we're just so used to hearing it. The parable has become, in a sense, kind of domesticated, it's become too familiar. So in order to kind of show you what the unexpected elements are, what I want to do is go back to the Old Testament, and in fact I want to go back to the Old Testament reading for today, because what you'll see is if you look at the Old Testament reading for today you're going to discover that Jesus isn't the first person to give a parable of a tree and compare the tree to the kingdom — although he is the first person to use a mustard tree or a mustard plant. So let's see what's going on here.

Turn with me back to the first reading, it's from the book of Ezekiel 17:22-24, and one of the interesting things about Ezekiel is that Ezekiel more than any of the other prophets loved parables, riddles, and allegories. So he'll frequently give these kind of extended discourses which are clearly allegorical or symbolic, in which

elements of the prophet's oracle are meant to be symbols for some other reality. And so the reading for today from Ezekiel 17 is Ezekiel's allegory of the kingdom of Israel, and in it he compares Israel to a tree but it's not a mustard tree, it's a cedar of Lebanon. So let's look at the allegory and I'll try to show you what Ezekiel is getting at. So Ezekiel the prophet, God speaks to him and says this:

Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar; and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I the LORD bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it."

What in the world is this about? Well this is a messianic prophecy. What God is doing is comparing the kingdom of Israel to a great cedar of Lebanon and what he is saying is that although the kingdom of Israel is going to be destroyed, God is going to take a sprig, he's going to take a branch from the top of the tree — we would call it a graft today — and he's going to take that sprig and he's going to plant it on a mountain top, a high and lofty mountain, so that it will become a great cedar and the birds of the air and the beasts of the field will come to nest in its branches. So in essence here this is an allegory of the future messianic kingdom. What God is saying is a piece of Israel is going to become the great future kingdom. He's going to take one small branch and make a great tree out of it. And any First Century Jew hearing this prophecy would think, for example, of the shoot of the stump of Jesse in Isaiah 11, right, because there Isaiah has a similar prophecy about a shoot that's going to come forth from the stump of Jesse, who was David's father, and that shoot will be the Messiah, right. So just as David's family was cut down like a tree will be cut down and made into a stump, that doesn't mean it's going to be over, it means a new tree is going to spring forth from the stump. And if you've ever tried to cut a tree down and you've left the stump you can see that frequently what will happen is the tree will grow back because a shoot will come out of its stump. In this case though, God is speaking of a graft. He's going to cut a branch off and he's going to plant it on the mountain top and it's

going to become the messianic kingdom. Just as a modern analogy, in case it helps, like recently we've been gardening and one thing we're doing is we're trimming off branches of our apple tree. And just for fun I stuck one of them in one of the garden beds, I stuck a few of them in there my kids and I, and now those branches are turning into little apple trees because the graft basically has been stuck into the dirt and it is going to grow of itself. That's what God's talking about doing here with this cedar of Lebanon that is the kingdom of Israel.

Now you might be thinking, what does any of this have to do with a mustard tree? Well it's real simple. Notice what God compares Israel to. It's not just any country, it's a cedar of Lebanon. Now what was a cedar of Lebanon? Well throughout the Bible the cedar of Lebanon was a cedar tree obviously that grew in Lebanon but it had a symbolic significance to it. Whenever you wanted to talk about greatness or grandeur or power or strength you would compare someone, something, or some kingdom to a cedar of Lebanon. So for example, just a couple examples here. In Jeremiah 22 it's a symbol of wealth. So it says that if the king wants to build his house, he's going to panel the house with not just any kind of wood, but with the wood of a cedar, right. Even to this day, do you want to buy pine or do you want to buy cedar? If you're looking to save money don't buy cedar because it's expensive. Same thing was true in ancient times. Why? Well one of the things was cedars were also a symbol of strength, it's a hardwood, it's durable wood. So in Psalm 29 when it says that the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon, that it breaks the branches of the cedars, the wind of the Lord, the breath of the Lord, it's showing that the Lord is powerful.

A third aspect of cedars is that they were very tall trees. This is really important — before we come back to Jesus' parable. Pliny the Elder, he was an ancient Greco-Roman writer, actually says that in his day the cedars of Lebanon were known to grow up to 130 feet tall. So that's a very tall tree and the Book of Isaiah 2 the prophet speaks about cedars of Lebanon being "lofty and lifted up." So they were known for being strong. They were known for being tall and they also were symbolic of wealth or grandeur, right. The final aspect of cedar trees in the Old Testament is one of the most important for us, which is that the prophets frequently use the cedar tree as a symbol for an empire, okay. Whether it's the empire of Babylon, whether it's the empire of Egypt, or whether it's the kingdom of Israel, if you want to symbolize an empire you compare it to a cedar of Lebanon. And

although this isn't the reading for today I would still call your attention to it, if you turn to Ezekiel 31:1-9 you can actually see how this happens. Why don't you just listen to the imagery that's being used here with Jesus' parable of the mustard tree in mind, right. So Ezekiel here is comparing the empire of Egypt to a cedar of Lebanon, and listen to how he describes it:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his multitude: 'Whom are you like in your greatness? Behold, I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds. The waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow round the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the forest. So it towered high above all the trees of the forest; its boughs grew large and its branches long, from abundant water in its shoots. All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field brought forth their young; and under its shadow dwelt all great nations. It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant waters. The cedars in the garden of God [meaning Eden] could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; the plane trees were as nothing compared with its branches; no tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty. I made it beautiful in the mass of its branches, and all the trees of Eden envied it, that were in the garden of God.'"

So pause there. So notice, the same prophet Ezekiel is giving an allegory of the kingdom of Egypt, of the empire of Egypt in which God is saying of Egypt, Egypt you are like a cedar of Lebanon, the tree reaches to the clouds, the branches spread out so great that all the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field came to dwell in it. — meaning that all the nations of the world were under the dominion of the Empire of Egypt. That's the final symbolism of a cedar of Lebanon. A cedar of Lebanon is an imperial symbol. It's a symbol for a kingdom that goes and conquers every other kingdom just like a cedar will spread out its branches to cover all the birds and all the beasts of the field.

Alright, now with that in mind, why does the church give us Ezekiel 17 and what's the connection with the Parable of the Mustard Seed? It's really simple. Jesus is teaching the people and he's saying to them, let me tell you what the kingdom of

God is like. In other words, let me tell you what the empire of God is like, because remember, a kingdom goes out and conquers other nations. That's the difference between a kingdom and a nation. A kingdom is a nation that rules over other nations and that's what Israel was called to be. So Christ comes on the scene, he's talking about the kingdom of God and he says the kingdom of God is like 'X' and everyone would expect him, if they know the prophets, they would expect him to say something like the kingdom of God is like a cedar of Lebanon. Its top reaches to the heavens, its branches spread out, it will have dominion over all the kings of the earth, all the birds of the air and the beast in the field will come to dwell under its glorious and beautiful branches, and no tree of Eden can compare to the kingdom of God. That's what you would expect him to say. Now what does he actually say? Well go back to Mark 4 and what does he say, "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed." So rather than a glorious cedar he says a little mustard seed. It's the smallest of the seeds but when it grows up it becomes the greatest of all, not all trees, Mark says the greatest of all shrubs. And the Greek word here is *lachanon*, it means vegetables basically, it's the word they use for vegetables. And if you look at mustard trees they get maximum — they're usually about 6 feet tall — but maximum they're about 10 feet tall, which is not a big tree, right. It's more like a big weed, like a tumbleweed — if you're from Texas or something like that you'll know what I'm talking about. It's a big bush and yet it's true that birds might come to nest in its branches but it's got nothing on a cedar of Lebanon.

So in other words, this parable of the mustard seed is really a riddle. It's that the kingdom of God doesn't look like you would expect it to look. The kingdom of God doesn't look like the empires of the world. It doesn't have the same political or military or economic grandeur that you're going to find with the kingdom of Egypt, or the empire of Babylon, or even like the kingdom of Israel in the Old Testament. David's kingdom is like a cedar of Lebanon but Jesus' kingdom is like a mustard seed, it starts small. Jesus' kingdom is like a mustard tree, it's kind of ugly, right, it's like a big weed. And if you know anything about mustard trees too, you'll know they spread rapidly like weeds do. Once they're planted you can't root them out, they just spread very quickly. You plant mustard seeds in your garden, you're going to have mustard, that's all you're going to have because it's going to grow and take over. So when people would've heard this original parable they would have walked away scratching their heads. On the one hand, the kingdom is powerful, it's pernicious like a mustard tree, it starts out small. And the other hand

it doesn't look glorious like we would've thought it would have looked. So the basic meaning of this parable I think is similar to the weeds and wheat in the field, right. You would think the kingdom of God will be like a glorious field full of white wheat, right? Instead it looks like, kind of like my garden, which is basically not doing too good. Yeah there's some vegetables there with a lot of weeds mixed in as well because I'm not very good at it. So the kingdom doesn't look like we expect it to look, it's mysterious, right. The church is filled with saints and sinners, right. The church is not like the kingdom of Egypt, it's not going to be an economic power, it's not going to be a military power. It's going to be a supernatural power that's going to be mysterious and it's going to be like the parable of that first seed. It's going to grow in secret, it's going to grow of its own power, and it's not going to be what we expect it to be. If I were to start a kingdom, I wouldn't start with 12 guys from Galilee, some of them fishermen, a tax collector, a former zealot. That's how Jesus begins his kingdom because he wants to show through the weakness of its members, that the power of the kingdom is not from them but from God, and that through its apparently unworldliness, right, through the way it doesn't cohere with previous empires of the world, that it's not a kingdom of this world but that it's a kingdom of heaven. That's the message of the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

So I'll close here just with two last points. First, the Responsorial Psalm for the day, Psalm 92, you can easily figure out why this was chosen now that we've looked at the Old and New Testaments, which is because it uses the imagery of two trees. In Psalm 92:12 it says:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

And then in verse 13 it says:

They are planted in the house of the LORD,
they flourish in the courts of our God.

So the Psalms will frequently use this image of a fruitful tree to describe the members of the kingdom, to describe the righteous person. And that gives us one last aspect here too, the cedar of Lebanon also symbolize the Temple, because

guess what wood they used to build Temple in 1 King 5-7? They used cedar wood, so that was part of the symbolism there.

And the final aspect is not from Scripture but from tradition, it's from Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council had a lengthy document on the church, and on the mystery of the church, and on the relationship between the church and the kingdom. The document is called *Lumen Gentium*, and its official title is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. And one of the great questions that the document deals with is the relationship between the Catholic Church, between the church and the kingdom of God. And you might think, why is that a problem? The church is the kingdom and the kingdom is the church, what's the big deal? But this has actually been something that's been hotly debated for the last 500 years. One of the big differences between Protestant theologies of the church and Catholic theologies of church is that lots of Protestant theologies of the church will say that the church and the kingdom are two different things, right. This was expressed by Alfred Loisy at the beginning of the 20th century, a famous atheist writer who said, "Christ promised the kingdom but what came was the church." So that's not a compliment by the way, what Loisy was saying was that Jesus' promise to bring the kingdom failed. Instead of getting the glory of the kingdom all we got was the church, right, with all of its, you know, problems and messes and problems throughout human history. So what do we make of that? Is the kingdom something we're still waiting to come? What's the relationship between the church and the kingdom? And Vatican II says this, and I think this flows right out of Jesus' parables:

Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us the mystery of that kingdom... *The Church*, or, in other words, *the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world.*²

That's paragraph three of *Lumen Gentium*. So Vatican II basically said that the church is the kingdom of God but it's the kingdom present on earth and in mystery. In other words, there's a certain veiled character to the church, there's a certain mystery there. When you look at the church it doesn't look like the glory of the

² Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumeng Gentium* no. 3

cedar of Lebanon, it looks more like an ugly mustard bush, a mustard tree, and yet it is the power of God at work in the world. The church triumphant, the church in heaven, is glorious but the church on Earth is the kingdom present in mystery; especially in the mysteries of the sacraments, which are the hidden ways that God is slowly bringing the world, and transforming the world, and redeeming the world, and bringing us into that glory of union with Christ, and eventually to the glory of the heavenly kingdom that we will see at the end of time. But we're not there yet, so for right now, it's still present in mystery.