

GOSPEL

MARK 4:26-34

Jesus said to the crowds, ‘This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, he loses no time; he starts to reap because the harvest has come.’

He also said, ‘What can we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable can we find for it? It is like a mustard seed which at the time of its sowing in the soil is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.’

Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus speaks to the crowd about the Kingdom of God and the dynamics of its growth, and he does so by recounting two brief parables. In the first parable, the Kingdom of God is compared to the *mysterious growth of the seed*, which is cast upon the ground and then sprouts, grows and produces ears [of grain], independent of the care of the farmer who, when it is fully grown, sees to its harvest. This is the message that this parable conveys to us: through Jesus’ teaching and action, the Kingdom of God is proclaimed, has burst into the field of the world and, like the seed, grows and develops by itself, through its own strength and according to humanly incomprehensible criteria. In its growth and development in history, it does not depend much on man’s doing, but is above all an expression of the power and goodness of God, of the strength of the Holy Spirit who brings forth Christian life in the People of God.

At times history, with its events and its protagonists, seems to go in the opposite direction of the design of the heavenly Father, who wants justice, fraternity and peace for all his children. But we are called to live out these periods as seasons of trial, of hope and of vigilant expectation of the harvest. Indeed, yesterday like today, the Kingdom of God grows in the world in a mysterious way, in a surprising way, revealing the hidden power of the little seed, its victorious vitality. Within the folds of personal and social events which at times seem to signal the failure of hope, it is important to remain confident in God’s subdued but powerful way of acting. For this reason, in moments of darkness and of difficulty we must not lose heart, but remain anchored in faithfulness to God, to his ever-saving presence. Remember this: God always saves. He is the Saviour.

In the second parable, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a *mustard seed*. It is a very small seed, yet it grows to become the greatest of all the plants in the garden: an unforeseeable, surprising growth. It is not easy for us to enter this logic of the unforeseeable nature of God and to accept it in our life. But today the Lord exhorts us to an attitude of faith which exceeds all our plans, our calculations, our predictions. God is always the God of surprises. The Lord always surprises us. It is an invitation to open ourselves more generously to God’s plans, both on the personal level and on that of the community. In our communities it is important to pay attention to the little and big occasions of goodness that the Lord offers us, allowing ourselves to engage in his dynamics of love, of welcoming and of mercy toward others.

The authenticity of the Church’s mission does not come through success nor through the gratification of the results, but by going forth with the courage of trust and the humility of abandonment to God. Going forth professing Jesus and with the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the awareness of being small and weak instruments which, in God’s hands and with his grace, can accomplish great deeds, advancing his Kingdom

which is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). May the Virgin Mary help us to be simple, to be attentive, to cooperate with our faith and with our work to develop the Kingdom of God in hearts and in history.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What stood out to you most about Pope Francis’ reflection?
- Ordinary time in the Church calendar has always been indicated by the colour green to symbolise growth. In what ways are you hoping to grow in your faith and personal life this year?
- Pope Francis reminds us that we are all “small and weak instruments which, in God’s hands and with his grace, can accomplish great deeds”. In what ways is that different to a worldly way of thinking?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.