

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

R7. Alleluia, alleluia.

The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower.

All who come to him will live forever.

R7. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mark 4:26-34; L92B

Jesus said to the crowds:

“This is how it is with
the kingdom of God;
it is as if a man were to
scatter seed on the
land

and would sleep and rise
night and day
and through it all the
seed would sprout
and grow,

he knows not how.

Of its own accord the land
yields fruit,

first the blade, then the ear,
then the full grain in the ear.

And when the grain is ripe, he wields
the sickle at once,
for the harvest has come.”

He said,

“To what shall we compare the
kingdom of God,
or what parable can we use for it?

It is like a mustard seed that, when it is
sown in the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on the
earth.

But once it is sown, it springs up and
becomes the largest of plants
and puts forth large branches,
so that the birds of the sky can dwell
in its shade.”

With many such parables

he spoke the word to them as they
were able to understand it.

Without parables he did not speak to
them,

but to his own disciples he explained
everything in private.



Reflecting on the Gospel

Parables are a genre that seem to be relegated to the gospels; not many people speak in parables today. But for Jesus, this was a routine way of teaching. Jesus’ parables have many meanings and people have differing interpretations of them. Some parables in Mark that are left ambiguous are explained in Matthew’s gospel. Other parables in Mark are simply enigmatic. We don’t find them in any other gospel and, frankly, we don’t know what Jesus might have meant. The first parable in today’s gospel falls into that latter category. The “seed growing secretly” has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Interestingly,

neither Matthew nor Luke reproduced it in their gospels. Because of its polyvalent meaning, many scholars say that this parable in particular is rooted in the sayings of the historical Jesus.

In some ways we are familiar with the gospel image of seed being scattered, such as the parable of the sower and seed, wherein the seed represents God’s word. This parable is found in Mark 4:1-20 with parallels in Matthew and Luke. But today’s gospel tells a different story. God’s kingdom is likened to a man scattering seed upon the ground, and the seed grows without the man knowing how. But when the grain is ripe, the man comes with the sickle. The parable of the mustard seed, which

follows immediately, is more familiar to us. Here too God kingdom is likened to something, but in this case a mustard

seed. The parable refers to it as the smallest seed of all, but it produces the greatest of all shrubs. Perhaps the meaning of this parable is more self-evident than that which preceded it. In any case, neither parable is explained.

We are told that Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, but he explained them to his disciples privately. We might wonder why Jesus would not explain the parables to the crowds. Our somewhat disturbing answer comes in the same chapter, where Jesus tells his disciples, “The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, so that / ‘they may look and see but not perceive, / and hear and listen but not understand, / in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven’” (Mark 4:11-12, NABRE). It may seem strange that Jesus would not want those on the outside to be converted and forgiven. But like other Markan passages, this tells us a great deal about the community for whom Mark wrote, and its sense of being persecuted. The disciples whom Jesus called formed bonds stronger than family. They were chosen to live in relationship with him and one another. Though he taught in enigmatic parables, he explained all to his disciples. Those on the outside understood the words, but not the hidden meaning of the parables.

Living the Paschal Mystery

At a Catholic Biblical Association meeting, one scholar said, “At some point we are going to have to address the strangeness, the oddness of Jesus.” We have domesticated Jesus to such a point that sometimes his message, what it mean’ at the time, is lost to nice explanations and tidy clarifications. But truthfully, Jesus was someone who spoke in riddle-like speech we call parables. Perhaps he did not want his meaning to be grasped by larger audiences. Or perhaps that is merely a reflection of the Markan community that preserved some of these

parables. In any case, these enigmatic sayings that Mark preserved needed a solution. They needed to be explained or simply dropped from the story. There are examples of each of these two kinds of solutions in Matthew and Luke. Though it can be difficult, it might not be bad to recognize that Jesus was perceived as eccentric. Such an image can challenge our catechetical Jesus. Let's allow him to speak with his own voice in the Scriptures, without wrapping up all the loose ends. His words have power and meaning, especially to a believing audience. Once that power is unleashed it becomes life-giving. But if it remains domesticated it loses its potential efficacy.

Focusing the Gospel

Mark 4:26-34

Farming is a matter of hard work and patient faith: all the farmer can do is plant the seed and nurture it along with water and care; God's unseen hand in creation transforms the tiny seed into a great harvest. Today's gospel parables of the seed that grows by itself (a parable unique to Mark's gospel) and the mustard seed, then, are calls to patience, hope, and readiness. The mustard seed—that tiny speck containing the chemical energy to create the great tree—is a natural parable for the greatness that God raises up from small beginnings. The faith of the sower is centered in a spirit of trust and gratitude that God makes all things work together for good.

Jesus may have been making a coded reference to the Zealots, a Jewish sect that sought the political restoration of Israel. Some Zealots were terrorists, employing murder and insurrection to destabilize the Roman government. The Zealots dreamed of a Messiah who would restore the Jewish nation. Jesus, however, calls them to see their identity as God's people not in terms of political might but of interior faith and spiritual openness to the love of God.

Focusing the First Reading

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Ezekiel's allegory of the cedar crest speaks of the "replanting" of the kingdom of Israel in the wake of the Babylonian occupation and destruction. From this small, humble "branch," God will reestablish his people as a "majestic cedar" of peace and justice for the world.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16 (see 2a)

The planting theme of today's Liturgy of the Word continues in today's responsorial Psalm 92. Palm trees were considered symbols of God's providence, trees that give both food and shelter from the burning desert sun and fierce storms. The "just" of God are like the magnificent cedar trees of Lebanon; their compassion and generosity of heart will continue into a graceful old age and then flourish anew in the house of God in eternity.

Focusing the Second Reading

2 Cor 5:6-10

This body of ours is not our home, Paul writes to the secular-focused Corinthian community; this "life" is not the beginning and end of our existence. We make our way to our true "home" by walking in the light of Christ. At the end of our journey, we will face the question, Did we come anywhere close to accomplishing in our "bodies" the good that Jesus did in his body?

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

Have you seen examples of "small seeds" someone unconsciously "planted" that resulted in an unexpected harvest for the good of others?

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Has your life ever been changed by a simple, small "mustard-seed-like" act of kindness or care?

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What does gardening and the planting and nurturing of seeds teach us about everyday life?

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