

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Ezekiel 17:22-24 / Mark 4:26-34)  
14.06.2015

We live in a world that encourages us to think along the lines *the bigger the better*, often coupled with the notion *the faster the better* too.

Everything pushes us to look for rapid growth, to want a large yield with little or no delay.

This train of thought can infiltrate our Christian communities as readily as it does so many in the society in which we live.

Mega-churches are hailed and advocated as the way forward in many places.  
Church growth is gauged in terms of numbers.

I have met with more than one pastor drawn from an Evangelical background - men who are ministering here in Northern Ireland in quite vibrant little communities, where there are clear signs of God's Spirit at work - who having come back from sessions on Christian leadership and Church growth in the United States are left feeling somewhat depressed. They consider themselves inadequate that their congregations are just the size they are. They have relayed their conclusions to me along these lines: *If we were really doing things right we would be bigger in number and higher in profile.*

This kind of outlook is not confined to Evangelical Protestants, it should be said.

I have sometimes heard members of Catholic Religious Congregations reason along the same lines.

*The bigger the better* notion, and those who push this particular agenda, can be hard to resist.

Despite what some might claim, the establishment of God's Kingdom, its growth and development, cannot be approached like a marketing project. We cannot think of the establishment of God's kingdom in terms of projected yields, predetermined targets, and everything being judged upon whether or not the goals we set are reached within a particular time delay.

We might not like to admit it, but, even in the Church, we can be so easily tempted to buy into what has been called *The American Dream* rather than the vision outlined for us by Christ Himself in today's gospel passage and/or that shared with us from Ezekiel's prophecy heard in our first reading.

We want to grow big and we want to be become great and we want all that to happen fast.

Perhaps more than anything else what we want is to be recognised as getting it right.

Reading the passages of Scripture proposed for our meditation this morning I found myself recalling the lyrics of a prayer-song from a famous film on Francis of Assisi (The film *Brother Sun and Sister Moon.*) This prayer-song, entitled *Stone By Stone*, is introduced more than once in the unfolding of the storyline of the film. It provides a kind of theme song which relays something of the experience of the early Franciscan brotherhood.

(Maybe the slow pace of the stonewall building taking place at the entrance to the monastery also helped to bring this song to mind last night.)

Let me quote the song's lyrics for you:

*If you want your Dream to be ~  
Build it slow and surely.*

*Small beginning, greater end  
Heartfelt work grows purely.  
If you want to live life free,  
Take your time, go slowly.  
Do few things but do them well.  
Simple joys are holy ~  
Day by day, stone by stone,  
Build your secret slowly.  
Day by day you'll grow too.  
You'll know heaven's glory.*

The first time the song is introduced in the film we see Francis and his companions, the initial small community of friars minor (literally the Little brothers), living their very humble beginnings. They are engaged in the work of restoring the church of San Damiano on the outskirts of Assisi. As they pursue their labours, others come to join them in their endeavour to rebuild God's house. The song is taken up again as things develop in the story. With the passage of time we are given to see how a whole praying community came to gather around the friars at San Damiano. This community of believers was made up of all sorts of people, drawn from every class and strata in society. We see them praying together in the rebuilt church. In a later scene of the film that presents this gathering, particular attention is drawn to the presence of the Lord in the people's midst. The whole atmosphere at this point in the story is one of love-inspired awe. All eyes in the packed little church are turned towards the Lord's presence in the sacrament of the altar, which Francis is depicted as having enthroned on the Lord's Table beside a gentle lamb Clare has already placed in the altar table.

It is as if it is acknowledged at this point that all the work that went into making San Damiano the place it became was none other than the Lord's own humble work. I see Christ Himself symbolised by that gentle paschal lamb.

The psalmist's words come to my mind as I say that: *Unless the Lord build the house, in vain do the builders labour.*

Or again what Paul writes to the Philippians acknowledging that *whatever good we accomplish is all God's work.*

That line from the Book of Psalms I have just quoted keeps us mindful that the work in which any/all of us are engaged, in our efforts to build up God's kingdom on earth, is not first and foremost our work, even our work for God, but God's own work, an *Opus Dei* (yes, a *work of God*), God's work in and through us.

This, I believe is fundamentally the same point that is made for us by Jesus in today's gospel parable.

I find the message of today's gospel parable both consoling and reassuring.

Likewise, I find Ezekiel's prophetic word to carry within it the same message of hope and comfort.

The Scripture passages we hear this morning have something to say to us when we begin to wonder what God's plans for us are, and when we begin to question if a future will open up for us.

Let us look a little more closely at today's gospel parable and try to unpack its message in this respect.

The first thing I would say is perhaps this: just how much the parable of the mustard seed contrasts with other parables found elsewhere in the gospels.

There are many other gospel parables that are much more challenging than that of the little mustard

seed.

We find parables in the gospels that are somewhat confrontational in style, aggressive nearly. They forcibly remind us, their listeners, of our responsibilities and draw attention to the severe consequences that lie in store for us if we do not live up to the demands they make of us. Today's gospel parable, in contrast, is really quite soft in its approach.

The parable of the mustard seed makes the point that all that is required of us are just some humble, really quite small, steps.

The kingdom of God is presented here in this story not as something to conquer through engagement in heavy combat, but through a simple sowing of seed.

The coming of the kingdom is likened to the scattering of tiny seed in the soil.

The real work is then left to the gentle, discreet, hidden action of God.

With God's help, the seed gently takes root and with time the shrub that has grown up is led to bear fruit.

The point to grasp here is that the growth of the kingdom does not depend solely upon what we do; it is not solely our work!

The growth of the kingdom is as much and more to do with the soil in which the seed is sown as it has to do with the work of the sower who sows the seed.

The seed mentioned is *the smallest of all the seeds*.

The notion of small beginnings is underlined for us here.

The great end arrived at really is shown to be of the order of a gift, a grace from God. It is God who gives the growth.

We cannot dictate how this will happen.

We have our part to play certainly, but always in cooperation with the Lord and indeed under His instructions.

(To return to our building image: the Lord is the Master-Builder.)

Unless the Lord gives growth to the seed, no tree and no abundant fruit will come forth from what has been sown in the ground.

There is a call for us in this story to do our little bit. We are to humbly sow the seeds the Lord confides to us for the sowing. These seeds may be a word we speak or a gesture we pose. The important thing is that we just consent to allow the Lord to use us, to the end He has in view. What matters is God's glory!

I find this approach to the parable somewhat comforting.

It takes away from us the undue pressure we sometimes place upon ourselves and which can make behave as if we are God. Such pressure (coupled with an exaggerated self-reliance, the imagination that all depends on us) can actually hinder the free flow and action of God's grace in and through us, more than enhance it.

It happens all too easily that we behave as if the growth of God's kingdom really is our affair.

Far too readily we approach things with the mentality that we are *working for God* (and even in His place!), rather than doing *the work of God*?

The latter approach (seeing ourselves engaged in the work *of* God) has us understand and assess ourselves as just simple labourers (*useless workers* the gospel says elsewhere), men and women called to labour humbly in the little corner of the Lord's great field to which we have been sent to do our little bit, to play our small part.

We could draw out many more lessons from the gospel parable we read today.

I won't draw attention to all the other important points that are contained in Jesus' teaching here.

Let me just flag up one more thing which I believe is worth noting in the story Jesus recounted.

I want to draw attention to the branches of the tree and the place the birds find thereupon.

I think there is great significance in the mention of the birds of the air being able to find shade in the tree's branches.

Certain manuscripts speak of the birds being able to build nests for their young upon the branches of the tree.

These images speak to us of two things: the first is the notion of refuge, security and peace, and the second, stemming from that, God's promised gift of new life.

These same notions of God-given peace and fecundity are also present in Ezekiel's prophecy read in today's first reading.

I understand this as saying to us that we are called to promote and advance the coming of the kingdom of God in this world by doing all we can to provide a safe shelter for others, by providing for them a place of refuge: a place wherein they are able to find the space they need to give birth to and care for the new life that is brought about within and through them, which reflects God's abundant creative grace.

The tree in the story is the whole Church and it is also each one of our particular Christian communities.

I dare to believe that among all the other shrubs in the Lord's vast field, this small monastery has its place and its particular role to play.

The Church is called to be a mother which engenders and protects the life of the children given to Her by God.

Likewise, our particular communities are called to fulfil that role in regard to those who are attracted to them.

(Our monastery, like every other Christian community, has a real responsibility before God and others in this regard.)

I see the part we have to play today as calling us to open ourselves up to the new life God wants to bring about within us and through us ~ for others!

(The Church does not exist for herself. Any and every Christian community, and among them, this, does not exist for itself, but for others!)

We have to dare to dream the dream that theme-song I quoted speaks of: God's dream, which is not simply our own dream.

What we have to offer may be small indeed, our contribution minimal, but let us engage ourselves genuinely to live the little mission confided to us. Let us do so with heartfelt fervour and true gospel zeal.

The growth promised to us is in God's hands.

In any case, in the end, only one thing matters and that is God's glory!