

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Psalm 91

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Mark 4:26-34

If there was any theme that could be said to take centre-stage in the public teaching of Jesus, it would be the Kingdom of God. In the *Our Father*, Jesus taught us to pray for its coming. Driving out demons was a sign of its approach. Parables were told to give us an idea of how it works.

Of the many parables of the Kingdom, several relate to the theme of its growth. Take, for example, the parable of the mustard seed in today's Gospel. The seed is tiny, in fact Jesus says that it is the smallest of all seeds. Yet from that seemingly insignificant thing, buried in the earth, springs forth the largest of shrubs, so large that it provides shade and shelter from the scorching heat.

This parable is beautifully illustrated in the growth of the Church in the first three hundred years after Christ. As far as the world was concerned, Jesus and his first followers were of no lasting significance. Galileans were looked down upon as country bumpkins by both the people of Jerusalem and their Roman overlords. Such people could be of no importance whatsoever. And the number of actual disciples was negligible in the larger scheme of things. While large crowds were attracted by the cures and free bread of Jesus' public ministry, we're told there were only 120 gathered in the upper room on Pentecost morning.

But 300 years later, that small group had turned into millions. In a perceptive study titled *The Rise of Christianity*, the sociologist Rodney Stark pointed out that neither spectacular public miracles or even the sudden conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine appear to have been responsible for this growth.

After all, we need to remember that for nearly three hundred years, being a Christian was a capital offense. If caught, you could be martyred publicly for the amusement of the crowds. Or maybe just tortured privately. Or, if you got off really easy, the state would just seize all your property. So there was a "cost of discipleship" that was a significant barrier to entry, to say the least. Yet on average, between 30 A.D. and 330 A.D., the Christian community grew at a rate of 40% per decade. So what explains the growth?

The reasons are obviously varied, but I would say that one of them directly illustrates the parable of the mustard seed. The local Christian communities were families, of an extraordinary kind. In a society in which women were routinely disrespected, women in Christian communities were honoured and protected. In a society where crude abortions were a regular fact of life, and unwanted infants were often abandoned, the Christian community celebrated children. In ancient cities where most occupants

were uprooted from their families and communities, the Christian community welcomed strangers.

There were two severe plagues that decimated Roman cities in the days of persecution. When pagans got ill, it was very common for their families to abandon them and flee to the countryside to escape contagion and what they expected to be a gruesome death. Christians mainly stayed in the cities, nursing their abandoned pagan neighbours as well as their own stricken members. As a result of loving nursing care and faith-filled prayer, many of the stricken recovered. And the community of charity grew.

When Julian—one of Constantine’s relatives—became emperor, he promptly renounced Christianity and tried to bring back the old-time pagan religion. He realised that the empty rituals of ancient paganism rang hollow in the face of Christian compassion, and so urged his pagan priests to try to imitate it. “These Galileans,” he complained, “are not only taking care of their own poor, but they are also taking care of ours!”

Christians were not, it should be noted, simply supplying handouts – they were opening their lives, their hearts and their homes. They had formed a new family in which everyone called God their Father, in which those who sought forgiveness were granted it, and in which Christian love was offered to all. Those who found shelter often accepted Jesus as their Lord and became part of this growing family that offered shelter to others.

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Now, from our current vantage-point, the sustained growth of the early Church can seem somewhat at odds with our present situation, in which the Church often seems to be sustaining regular losses, both in terms of the number of those practicing their faith, and in terms of the Church’s societal influence. One thing to keep in mind here is that we are a global Church, and that in Asia and Africa the Church continues to grow, such that globally there are more Catholics now than ever before.

And yet we also need to remember that, alongside images of growth such as today’s parable of the mustard seed, Jesus also used more humble images such as salt and leaven to describe the Kingdom of God. Such images would seem to suggest that his followers might at times be small in number, whilst nonetheless playing an indispensable—if often unseen—role in a society: by working to preserve the true, the good, and the beautiful.

And indeed, during his public ministry Jesus himself seemed rather unconcerned with the question of how many people were following him. He even seemed to go out of his way to thin out his less-committed followers on a regular basis, which forces us to think twice before we become too preoccupied with “bottoms on seats”.

A longer view of history shows that the Church in various places has often alternated between periods of growth and renewal and times of decline or indeed persecution. And certainly for us here in the industrialised West at least, we do seem to be presently going through a period of purification of sorts.

As far back as 1970, a young Fr Joseph Ratzinger—the future Pope Benedict XVI—had predicted in a book titled *Faith and the Future* that the Church in the West would likely become smaller, and suffer various trials as she proceeded to lose many of the social privileges to which she had become accustomed. Yet he also predicted that from this position of poverty a simplified Church would begin to rediscover her essence with renewed conviction and eventually blossom anew.

Something living can only grow forth from something that is truly alive, and so Ratzinger maintained that such a time of purification—difficult though it would be—would have the effect of whittling away many of the more lukewarm and nominal Christians, resulting in smaller communities of really convinced believers who strive to live their faith. And as the society around them came to terms with the dreary implications of trying to live without Christ, the witness of such convinced believers would become increasingly attractive to an increasingly lonely world, just as it did in the Church's first centuries.

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So anyway, however things play out for us in the years to come, we can take solace from the first image that Jesus used in today's Gospel: A man throws seed on the land, and night and day—in ways he knows nothing of—the seed sprouts and grows, until eventually it is ready for the harvest.

In whatever life situations we find ourselves in, we believers are called to plant seeds of the Gospel – seeds of light and love born from our own encounters with Christ. We plant the seeds... and God takes care of the rest. Someone else may end up reaping the harvest that we have sown, but that's okay. As Mother Teresa so often said, we are called to be faithful, not successful.

We have it on good authority that no deed done out of love is ever wasted. In Christ, even the smallest parts of our lives are given cosmic significance. So let us strive to remain in union with Christ, knowing that, in the Lord's time, and in the Lord's way, anything we do out of love for him will bear fruit in plenty for the Kingdom of God.