

HOMILY 11th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
GOD'S EVOLVING KINGDOM – 'FROM LITTLE THINGS, BIG THINGS GROW'

Mk 4.26-34 Ez 17.22-24 2Cor 5.6-10

And now it's a gradual welcome back to 50 at a time, as we open up again, but continue to provide a virtual link to our celebration of Eucharist, as a thriving faith community. On Friday I was finally able to get back to complete the second stage of Reconciliation after the March communal celebration with our young candidates. Their resilience is evident in the way they expressed happiness at being back at school with their friends and teachers in good numbers, at short notice. There's no substitute for personal face to face engagement, and they clearly expressed this. Whilst presenting as young and innocent, in growing and learning, they generally have a good appreciation of the fact that they can do the wrong thing at times, and the fact that it's good to say sorry and to be forgiven by those they can hurt, with the reassurance of a loving and forgiving God, as revealed in the person of Jesus.

When I was their age, I recall being fascinated in class, by the wheat seed in the cotton wool and water, the way the seed split and the green shoot just kept growing day by day. Then there was what later became *Mister Potatohead*, with another example of the simple potato's tubers rapidly growing in a similar way, as still occurs in the darkness of my pantry, even today! It all provides a very simple demonstration of what we can take for granted in the wonderful world of nature all around us.

As I get older, I can only wonder more, at the beauty and diversity of the environment around us. We are fortunate here, even in the periods of heavy lockdown, that we can get out for a bit of exercise and walk to and along the river, observing the slowly changing colours of autumn, except for the evergreen eucalypts, although the wattle is also starting to appear now. In colder climates, the observable effects of growth are even more striking, as I reflect on the brilliance of autumn or *Fall* colours of the maples in Ottawa, prior to the starkness of winter, tempered by the lovely powder snow piling up and brightening up the scene. Then, I recall the remarkable rapid growth of the springtime, as the new green buds shot forth into flowers and leaves.

We now go back to relatively early in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus uses parables, with examples taken from his own experience of the world around him, a literally down to earth way of conveying a message of hope, in circumstances where he had been facing ignorance and outright rejection, not being accepted in his own home town, where people were familiar with him and his family, the old '*prophet not being accepted in his own country*' or '*familiarity breeding contempt*' scenario.

As Claude Mostowik MSC puts it: "*Mark's community was being persecuted. It believed that the just would flourish like the palm trees, yet they were being martyred in Rome and rejected in Jerusalem. Such ugly and incomprehensible realities caused serious misgivings. Were they just misguided as others claimed? Were they taken in by a fanatical sect? Mark was responding to a frightened and disillusioned community that was physically threatened and plagued by the doubts arising from unmet expectations... True growth is often imperceptible. It is not about a quick fix or numbers.*" It all takes time, patience, perseverance and conviction that each of us can do our bit to make a positive difference.

The scholars also suggest that each of the Gospel evangelists take Jesus' images of metaphors, to relate to the experience of the early Christian communities for whom they were writing, as there was clearly opposition to the message, division in communities and even within families, where some were open to the notion of Jesus as Saviour, showing the way forward, and others resisting any new ideas of change, and wanting to stick with what they were familiar, be it Jewish faith, worship and traditions, or those of other pagan or Gentile backgrounds. What is clear from the start, is that the Gospel message was to be proclaimed to all as a universal message of hope and way of life.

Isn't it funny, but so human, how the obvious can be obfuscated as time goes by, and peripheral distractions can cloud the fundamental message, which is about living life well according to the law of love, taking the message of Jesus to heart and applying it to our lives?

Jesus' words are of reassurance, encouragement and hope, despite the obstacles along the way. The smallest of seeds is not going to be stopped from its natural process of growth and ultimately flourishing, given the

inevitability of nature, providing the necessary nourishment is present. It's a simple but effective illustration of how the message cannot be suppressed in the longer term, with the faith dimension that God's presence endures, whatever the difficulties. The Jerome Biblical Commentary even uses a chemical term for Jesus' parables being, *polyvalent*, that is, adaptable to the different circumstances of the early Christians.

The mustard seed image follows on from the parable of the sower and then the lamp to see and then hear and understand the message, then the spontaneous growth of any seed, then the mustard seed we have here, where Raymond Brown concludes: *'Ultimately there would be tremendous growth and abundant harvest'*, whatever adversity strikes along the way. Frank Moloney SDB writes of *"the strange contradiction which nature itself provides: abundant crops from the smallest of all beginnings... The silent action of God will eventually bear fruit."* And, finally, the birds of the air get a mention too, sheltering in the shade, in the branches of the tree which has grown.

Brendan Byrne SJ suggests: *"For Jesus, however, the essence of the kingdom was not the gaining of political freedom or prosperity, - at least not in first instance. The essence of the Kingdom was renewed relationship with God, involving an unconditional offer of forgiveness and familial intimacy with God (Our Father)."*

Repentance and faith is called for. It's all about countering discouragement. Growth is inevitable as time moves on, despite the unavoidable setbacks. We need to continue to be faithful disciples of hope, prayer and action.

john hannon

13th June 2021