11th Sunday (14th June 2015)

*A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark: (Mk.*4: 26-34)

Jesus said, “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 earth 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.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord.*

**………………………**

Discouragement is an ever present danger in our Christian life. At a time or another, we all feel like giving up the struggle and start living without worrying too much about the demands of our Christian vocation.

- There are two main causes of our losing heart in Christian life:

         *first, our personal weaknesses:*no matter how much we try, we keep on relapsing into sin time and again.

         *second, the problems arising within the Christian community:*dissension seems to be a perpetual problem among us; more and more people fail to attend church regularly, selfishness and pleasure seeking are evident everywhere, our youth keeps on getting out of control, these and other problems affect us deeply.

And they make us wonder: what will the future of our Christian community be... ? In fact, since these problems repeat themselves everywhere, we cannot but ask ourselves: has the Church a future in our country and the world?

- The three readings of today are meant to boost our courage; there is a common lesson in all the three, and it is as follows:

*The success of the kingdom of God, both within ourselves and in the world at large, is more God’s work than ours. We should not trust ourselves but place in God our confidence. All that God wants from us is that we try to carry out his will at all times in spite of our weaknesses.*

Let us attentively examine the readings.

1. The announcement of the prophet Ezekiel:

- The first reading of today contains a message of God through the prophet Ezekiel to the Jews then living in exile. We cannot grasp well the meaning of the passage, unless we first find out the circumstances in which the prophet wrote it. Let me explain:

- When Solomon died, his kingdom was divided into two: the so-called Kingdom of Israel to the North, comprising ten tribes with Samaria as capital, and the Kingdom of Judah to the South, with only two tribes. Jerusalem was its capital.

- Ezekiel was born in Jerusalem, the son of a Jewish priest. By the time he was born, the *Kingdom of Israel*in the North had already been destroyed by the Assyrians, deadly enemies of the Jews. Only the tiny *kingdom of Judah*remained, a small territory around Jerusalem.

-  The king of Judah, Jehoiakim by name, had to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. When he refused to do so, Nebuchadnezzar sent his army. His soldiers plundered Jerusalem, took Jehoiakim prisoner, and with him, the best part of the population as slaves to far away Babylon.

- Ezekiel was among the prisoners; he was then about 30 years of age, and had not yet been called by God to be a prophet. It was six years later, while in exile, that God called him to be his messenger, the spiritual guide of the Jews in exile.

- Nebuchadnezzar did not abolish the kingdom of Judah there and then; he appointed another king, Zedekiah by name, to take the place of Jehoiakim, on condition that he would continue to pay him tribute.

- The great prophet Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem at the time. Inspired by God, the prophet advised King Zedekiah to submit to Nebuchadnezzar, as the only way to save the little that was left.

King Zedekiah however, did not abide for long by the message God had given through Jeremiah; he rebelled against the king of Babylon. This time, the Babylonian army fell on Jerusalem, razed both city and Temple to the ground, and took into slavery to Babylon most of its population. Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah’s sons slaughtered under their father’s very eyes; he then pulled out the eyes of the Zedekiah, and thus blind, took him to Babylon, there to live and die as a slave.

This last destruction of Jerusalem had been announced by Ezekiel to the people living in exile and by Jeremiah to the people still living in Jerusalem; neither prophet was believed. It was some time before this final destruction of Jerusalem that the prophet Ezekiel made the announcement contained in this Sunday’s first reading.

- Humanly speaking, that destruction should have marked the end of Israel as a people; no power on earth could ever dream of delivering Israel from the power of the Babylonian king.

And yet, this was the time chosen by God to convey a message of hope to his people. In his message, Ezekiel speaks of trees and of birds: *the trees represent nations, while birds represent persons or people.*

- Israel in exile could be compared to a felled tree doomed to disappear.

Yet, Ezekiel tells us, that God would take a tiny shoot from the top of that tree and replant it in Jerusalem. It would strike roots and become a mighty tree, so tall and so luxuriant as to cause admiration to all the nations of the earth, (represented by the other trees in the forest); all the birds of the earth, (all peoples) would one day flock   
to take shelter in its branches.

Ezekiel ends today’s passage by telling us that it is God who causes luxuriant trees to wither, while causing the withered ones to revive and to grow into mighty trees once again.

The meaning was clear: Israel in exile was like a withered tree about to disappear; God would see to it that it grew into a nation again, while those powerful kingdoms which oppressed Israel would disappear.

In fact, by the time Jesus came into the world, not one of those powerful kingdoms which had oppressed the people of Israel was standing; they had all been destroyed. The power of Rome too which oppressed the Jews at the time of Jesus would one day disappear.

- Yet, it is clear that Ezekiel was not speaking about the Jews becoming again an independent nation with a king of their own. This would never happen again. Though fifty years later the Jews were allowed to return home, they never regained political independence; one foreign domination succeeded another.

*Ezekiel was not speaking of an earthly kingdom but of a spiritual one, the Kingdom of God, which the Messiah would come to establish and which would last for ever. It is the same kingdom Jesus refers to in the Gospel of today.*

2. No one can stop the Kingdom of God from spreading:

- Jesus must have had the prophecy of Ezekiel in mind when comparing God’s Kingdom to a grain of mustard-seed. Ezekiel spoke of a tiny shoot, Jesus of a small seed.

Mustard seed is small, though not *“the smallest of all seeds” (Mk. 4:*31). All Jesus meant to say was that it is very small. He used a common way of speaking among Jews; to stress that something was very small they would say: *“It is smaller than a grain of mustard-seed.”*

 - You remember that Jesus himself made use of this comparison to regret that the faith of his apostles was very small *(Mt.*17: *20)*

- But the message the parable conveys is the same as the one God conveyed, through Ezekiel, to the Jews in exile:

There is no comparison between the size of a grain of mustard seed and the bush that grows from it which in Palestine reaches a height of 10 to 12 feet. - Similarly, no one could expect that the Kingdom of God which had such a humble beginning when Jesus preached, would spread to the whole world.

- Both the tiny shoot of Ezekiel and the grain of mustard seed of Jesus, represent the Church. It was planted in Jerusalem, struck roots on Pentecost day and has been growing and spreading ever since.

It is still growing; though attacked and persecuted, no power on earth can stop its growth. People from all nations (the birds) come to it, we ourselves among them.

*Should this not give us courage to do our best to make this our Christian community what God wants it to be a luxuriant and fruitful tree, rather than go on mourning over our weaknesses?*

3. Unless we ourselves prevent it, God’s Kingdom keeps on growing within us at all times:

- In today’s Gospel Jesus tells us that after sowing the seed in his field, there is little the farmer can do but to wait patiently for it to sprout and grow.

This is God’s work; there is a wonderful power buried in the tiny seed. Not even the wisest scientist can explain how it really sprouts, grows and reaches maturity. God’s power and wisdom are at work in its growth.

The farmer’s work is to weed the field and to defend it against wild animals or thieves. But most of the work is God’s. He is the one who sends the rain and the sunshine which the plants need. The farmer spends many hours in his field, but God is at work at each tiny plant at all times.

- We can easily understand what this language means when applied to the Kingdom of God within us. God himself planted the seed through the Word of God preached to us; this seed sprouted at Baptism and has been growing ever since. It goes on growing unless we destroy it through serious sin. Prayer, listening to God’s Word, the Eucharist   
and the other sacraments are the rain and the sunshine that hasten the growth of God’s Kingdom within us.

- When will the harvest come?

At our death, the very moment the Kingdom of God attains maturity within us. We would not fear death so much if we kept in mind that God has chosen for each one of us *the most suitable moment,*and that He goes on preparing us for that moment with infinite love.

*But there is more:*

We should also rejoice at the thought that the Kingdom of God goes on growing and attaining maturity not only within us but also in the hearts of our brothers and sisters in the community.

Everyone notices when the community grows in number; what is hidden to our eyes is the way God’s Kingdom grows within the hearts of people. And yet, growing it does in spite of human weakness.

- Whenever a member of our community dies, we mourn over him or her and rightly so. But looking at death with the eyes of faith we should rather rejoice and exclaim:

How lucky of him/her; God hastened to collect his/her harvest the moment it was ripe, and to place it safely in the granary of heaven.

*Should this thought not encourage us to go on diligently tending the field of our soul in spite of failures and helping others tend theirs?*

**4. To secure our harvest we must do God’s will:**

- Early Christians believed that the second, final coming of Christ would take place during their life-time. Gradually, the Spirit gave them to understand that it would not be so.

- In the second reading of today, taken from the second letter of Paul to his Christians of Corinth, Paul tells them that the apparent delay in Jesus’ coming should not disturb them.

Truly, says Paul, we should consider ourselves as living in exile here below; our true home is not here but in heaven with the Lord.

Yet we should go through life with complete confidence. All we have to do is to go on pleasing the Lord, that is, doing his will, in spite of human weakness and occasional failures.

*The way we do God’s will determine the quality of the harvest which Christ will come to gather when we die.*

Let us pray: Father in heaven, we thank you for having planted your Kingdom within our heart and for your continuous love in making it grow within us. Help us to   
do your will at all times that we may be a harvest ready for heaven when our death comes. - Amen.