

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (Ezekiel 17.22-24)

The Noble Cedar

The task of prophet Ezekiel was to keep up the spirits of the Jews exiled to Babylon. For them, it seemed that the Sack of Jerusalem was the end of all hope: they had lost their homes, their King, their Temple and even their covenant with God. Ezekiel was a person of fantastic imagination, not afraid to indulge in wild and daring mimes to force through his message that God was still in charge and still caring for Israel. He mimed the siege of Jerusalem by building a mud brick model and escaping through the wall. His visions are also daring and inspiring. Perhaps the best known is the Valley of the Dead Bones, prophesying that Israel will come to life again, and read at our Easter Vigil.

The present chapter is an imaginative allegory about a great cedar tree despoiled by two eagles, that is, Israel despoiled by Babylon and Egypt. Our reading is a tailpiece, promising that Israel will again become a great cedar tree, in whose shade the nations will come to take shelter. The gospel parable uses the same figure of a great tree in which all peoples will shelter. The great cedars on the mountains of the Lebanon are an awesome and unforgettable sight, stretching far into the sky and wide across the hills, a suitable refuge for great birds.

Question: *Is the Church a refuge in which we may shelter?*

Second reading: (2 Corinthians 5.6-10)

At Home with the Lord

Paul uses several different sets of imagery to convey the goal of the Christian life for which he is longing. We know that all imagery is inadequate, but especially such pictures as heaven 'up there', in the clouds, playing harps.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul used images of participating in God's power, incorruptibility and glory, transformed into a new mode of being by the Spirit. In last week's reading, he spoke of the 'weight of glory'. In today's reading, he speaks of 'being at home' with the Lord in contrast to being in exile. Now that we are adopted children of God, to be with the Lord is our natural family homecoming. In the final sentence, he envisages also the final judgment when we are laid bare for what we truly are, the frightening but comforting moment at which we see ourselves as God sees us, when we can cease putting on an act and keeping up appearances.

Before God, there is neither need nor possibility of pretence. All masks are stripped off. This, too, is an aspect of being at home, for there is no pretending before the family. This fills him with courage and optimism on his journey home from exile.

Question:

How do you envisage 'heaven'?

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Gospel:

(Mark 4.26-34)

The Seed Growing

Jesus was a countryman, from the rich agricultural plains of Galilee, where wheat and fruit trees abounded. It was natural from him to use such imagery for the Kingship of God which he was proclaiming. Today's gospel reading offers us two of the many images in Mark's chapter of parables. What did Jesus want to teach by them? Images can carry many layers of meaning.

First, the seed growing secretly. Perhaps Jesus meant that God's purposes are accomplished in spite of our feeble and fumbling efforts. Perhaps it was a warning that after long waiting the time for decision, the time of harvest, had come with Jesus' own mission.

Then the mustard seed: was this a reply to the discouraged disciples - or perhaps Jesus' critical opponents - that his motley little group of undistinguished peasants, fishermen and tax collectors would grow into God's own mighty tree. Perhaps this is a first hint that Jesus' mission is for all nations, not just for Israel. All nations would come, nest and find a home in its branches, just as in the first reading they nest in the branches of the great cedar tree.

At any rate, both images show that God is in charge, and has great plans that will be fulfilled, in spite of our own inadequacies.

Question:

What does Jesus mean to teach by this parable?
