**Homily for the 11th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**June 13, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24 (The Lord will plant a tender shoot on the heights of Israel.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 92 (Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.)*

*Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (We walk by faith, not by sight.)*

*Gospel: Mark 4:26-34 (Two parables about the Kingdom of God.)*

Between the four gospels, there are *52 instances* in which Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that this was his favorite subject. He talked about it all the time: “The Kingdom of God is like this, or like that. To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? What parable can we use to describe it?” And yet, he never bothered to define what exactly he meant by “the Kingdom of God.” Instead, he kept offering hints, pointing at this mystery from all different angles, using every image and metaphor he could possibly think of from everyday life. Each parable was helpful in illuminating some aspect of the Kingdom of God, but the full meaning of that term remained elusive to his listeners. In fact, it remains elusive to us, even today. And, maybe that’s the point. Perhaps the Kingdom of God *transcends* all human concepts and human means of expression. Maybe the *best we can do* is to explore various qualities of the Kingdom of God by means of analogies and parables, even as the divine reality itself continues to defy any attempt at description or definition. Although Jesus’ method of teaching about the Kingdom of God can be quite frustrating for those who want clear, concise answers in matters of faith, his approach does prompt us to further reflection. Knowing that there is always more to this mystery than we can grasp, we can constantly pursue deeper understanding and a corresponding deepening of our faith.

It might be useful to put aside the notion that the Kingdom of God is an *objective thing*, and think of it more as a *subjective reality*. Rather than asking *what it is*, maybe we should look at all of Jesus’ parables about the Kingdom of God, taken together, and ask ourselves what sort of reality he appears to be describing. It seems to me that he’s referring to the various ways in which God interacts with his people and the rest of Creation. Since God’s actions cannot be observed directly, evidence of the Kingdom of God will always remain subject to interpretation (and, unfortunately, *misinterpretation*). It will always be possible for some to dismiss the Kingdom of God as nothing more than a religious fantasy. Yet, the Kingdom of God can be perceived by those who recognize moments of grace when they occur – those who “walk by faith, not by sight,” to borrow St. Paul’s phrase. Jesus’ parables can help us to perceive the Kingdom of God in our midst, by alerting us to signs of God’s presence and activity. Each image points toward that hidden reality from a different perspective, revealing something about how God exercises his divine power in the physical world that we inhabit.

In today’s gospel, for example, Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. With hyperbole that is very typical of rabbinical teaching, he says that the mustard seed is “the smallest of all the seeds on the earth, but once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.” The point, it seems, is to emphasize the immense power of God’s grace to act in the world. Resting in the shade of a tree is a common Old Testament way of speaking about God’s protection and care. Here Jesus indicates that God can break through into our world in the most subtle ways to offer that sort of rest and protection that we seek. God does not need to act only through dramatic, earth-shaking events. All he needs is the smallest opening to make a profound difference in the world and in our lives.

With the image of a farmer planting and harvesting a crop, Jesus brings out another important aspect of the Kingdom of God. The farmer scatters seed on the land and then watches it sprout and grow, without knowing how all of this new life is being generated. Of course, the farmer, and everyone in the crowd listening to this parable, knows what to expect. First, the seed will germinate underneath the ground. Then the blade will push up through the soil. Then the ear will form. Then the full grain will develop within the ear. And, eventually, the grain will be ripe for harvesting. The farmer knows how and when to sow the seeds, and he knows how to interpret the signs of growth to determine the right time for harvest. Yet, how all of this growth happens is beyond his comprehension. And so it is with the entire natural world in which we live.

With every passing generation, we human beings seem to gain greater mastery over Creation, sometimes with devastating effects on our climate and ecosystems. Our scientific discoveries and technological advances can lead us to believe (falsely) that one day we will understand and control everything in our domain. Some prominent scientists have declared as much, claiming that faith is an illusion, and that the elimination of all mystery is only a matter of time and human ingenuity. But, Jesus’ parable challenges that delusional way of thinking. If we don’t even know why seeds sprout, why plants grow, why human cells divide, why life in all its forms flourishes, then we must be far from the masters of nature that we sometimes pretend to be. The image of the farmer cooperating with a life force that is beyond his understanding or control can lead us to greater humility and greater faith in the One who *is*, in fact, all-knowing and all-powerful.

Another important message that we can draw from the parable of the farmer is to avoid taking too much *credit* or too much *blame* for what our human efforts produce. No matter how hard we work for a desired outcome, the results will never be entirely in our hands. Hence, we should not become too *inflated* when we succeed or too *deflated* when we fail. And we should always look for signs of grace in everything that happens, whether in success or failure. We should always seek to understand more deeply how God is working in us and in our world. And, perhaps even more importantly, we should seek to understand how God works *through us* to make the world a better place. The more we learn to cooperate with that unseen grace which is constantly at work in us and around us, the more we can fulfill our Christian mission to *build* the Kingdom of God, even as we struggle to understand it completely.