

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B



FIRST READING
Ezekiel 17:22–24

PSALM
Psalm 92:2–3, 13–16

SECOND READING
2 Corinthians 5:6–10

GOSPEL
Mark 4:26–34

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PRAYER

Psalm 92:2–3, 13–16

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name,
O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love
in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
The righteous flourish
like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted
in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
showing that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock,
and there is no unrighteousness in him.

READING THE WORD

First Reading
Ezekiel 17:22–24

Thus says the Lord GOD:
I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;
I will set it out.
I will break off a tender one
from the topmost of its young twigs;

I myself will plant it
on a high and lofty mountain.
On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs
and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.
All the trees of the field shall know
that I am the LORD.
I bring low the high tree,
I make high the low tree;
I dry up the green tree
and make the dry tree flourish.
I the Lord have spoken;
I will accomplish it.

Second Reading
2 Corinthians 5:6–10

So we are always confident; even
though we know that while we are
at home in the body we are away
from the Lord— for we walk by
faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have
confidence, and we would rather be
away from the body and at home
with the Lord. So whether we are at
home or away, we make it our aim
to please him. For all of us must
appear before the judgment seat of
Christ, so that each may receive rec-

ompense for what has been done in
the body, whether good or evil.

Gospel
Mark 4:26–34

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is
as if someone would scatter seed on
the ground, and would sleep and
rise night and day, and the seed
would sprout and grow, he does not
know how. The earth produces of
itself, first the stalk, then the head,
then the full grain in the head. But
when the grain is ripe, at once he
goes in with his sickle, because the
harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we
compare the kingdom of God, or
what parable will we use for it?
It is like a mustard seed, which,
when sown upon the ground, is the
smallest of all the seeds on earth;
yet when it is sown it grows up and
becomes the greatest of all shrubs,
and puts forth large branches, so
that the birds of the air can make
nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke
the word to them, as they were able
to hear it; he did not speak to them
except in parables, but he explained
everything in private to his disci-
ples.

HEARING THE WORD

“Flourishing”

God stands behind all growth and development in the life of individual Christians and communities. Still, to flourish as God’s people, certain human responses are necessary for God’s work to bear the desired fruit.

The words of the prophet Ezekiel can only be understood in the context of the entire ch 17 of his book. They are firmly grounded in Israelite history and were originally addressed to the Babylonian exiles. The prophet uses the imagery of an eagle, a vine and a cedar to create short, symbolic stories known as allegories. In 17:1-4 the prophet writes about the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, “a great eagle”, who in 597 BC invaded Jerusalem, and took the Israelite king, and the most important leaders, into exile to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar made a certain Zedekiah king to govern the Israelite people on his behalf. But Zedekiah had other plans. In 17:5-10 Ezekiel describes how the disloyal Zedekiah made an alliance with a “second eagle”. This was the Egyptian Pharaoh who promised to fight with Zedekiah against Nebuchadnezzar. But when Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, the Egyptian promises proved empty

and no one came with help. The results of Zedekiah’s rebellion were tragic. Nebuchadnezzar’s army utterly destroyed Judah, and burned Jerusalem, together with the Temple. This was the end of the proud and glorious nation and its splendid Temple. The second part of the chapter, 17:11-21, explains clearly that it was Zedekiah’s foolish decisions that brought about this disaster. Our first reading today contains the final part of this chapter. The prophet speaks of yet another great eagle, God himself. Ezekiel declares that God will act decisively to restore the Israelite kingdom. He uses the image of a “cedar”, a magnificent tree which grew in Lebanon and was a symbol of longevity and grandeur. God will take a little branch from that great tree and plant it in on the mountains of Israel. This single shoot will grow into a magnificent cedar in whose shade all creatures will find security and shelter. This is a symbolic portrayal of the restoration of the nation, which will be done by God himself. He will humble all those who intended to humiliate and destroy his people. He will reinstate his people in their land, which they lost through the folly of their leader. In the meantime, as they endure painful exile, they must keep their hope and trust in God alive. These will allow them to survive and even flour-

ish in their exile. Hope and confidence in God’s salvific action will be their life-giving force.

Just as in the first reading, the words of Paul must be read in context. Last Sunday’s second reading contained the preceding verses of 2 Corinthians where Paul revealed that his dedication to the mission rested on belief in the resurrection. The prospect of the resurrection gave him the confidence and strength to expose himself to dangers and even to risk death. In today’s reading he goes a step further expressing his longing for joining Christ in the afterlife. Paul longs for departing from this body to join Christ in heaven. These words do not reflect suicidal thoughts, but are a powerful expression of Paul’s unshaken faith in the resurrection. Paul does not seek death. In Philippians 1:23-24 he reveals the same desire to be with the Lord, but adds that he also realizes the importance of his mission in this world. In today’s passage he also emphasizes the importance of the present life, where he seeks to accomplish his apostolic mission, and to do good. His faith in the resurrection, and his sense of responsibility for the Churches he founded, makes him respond appropriately to God’s grace, and to flourish as an apostle and a human being.

Mark ch 4 consists entirely of Jesus's parables. The two we read today focus on the theme of the kingdom of God. This phrase means God's rule over the people, their hearts, minds and bodies. Those in God's kingdom live the life of faith, focused on serving God and following his ways.

The first parable recalls the words of Ezekiel, in its emphasis that God himself makes his kingdom grow. Behind the people's adherence to God, lies God's own initiative and power. Still, before growth can take place, the seed needs to be scattered by the farmer. This implies that humanity must take an active part in spreading the news of salvation in the world. Human participation, in the process of growing in faith and submission, may be minimal, however, while God causes and directs the growth, there is no growth without the prior efforts to sow the seed.

The second parable refers to Ezekiel in an even more obvious way, using the image of a tiny seed that grows into a powerful and shelter-giving tree. The mustard seed, just like Ezekiel's small branch, grows into a magnificent tree that provides shelter and security for creatures. This Gospel parable points to the humble beginnings of God's rule. It begins with something as small as a word. But, since its growth is caused, and overseen, by

God, it will gradually expand into a universal reality, that will encompass the entire world. This parable contains a powerful assurance for the disciples who are just a few individuals facing the entire world. What does one need to do to participate in this growth? Jesus answered that question clearly at the beginning of his ministry, saying that one must respond to the coming kingdom by repentance and belief (Mk 1:15). Both parables emphasize that God stands behind the growth and the spread of his kingdom in the world. However, in order to flourish, God's faithful must respond to the kingdom's presence by a life of active engagement in the kingdom, accompanied by a life of repentance and faith.

The theme of God's power operating in and through his faithful is a commonplace one in the Bible. This power is necessary for God's people to develop and flourish. Ezekiel confirms this basic truth in beautiful metaphorical language. He assures the people who had lost their Temple and their land, that God will restore them to security and greatness. While waiting for God's intervention the people must not lose hope and confidence. These will preserve them in their exile. For Paul, firm confidence in the resurrection, and awareness of his responsibilities as an apostle, make him flourish in response to God's grace. In

parables, Jesus speaks of God's kingdom inaugurated by his presence and teaching. This kingdom may have humble beginnings, but God will oversee its growth. Jesus' followers need only respond to his words, with faith and life changing repentance, to grow and flourish on both individual and community level. Those who respond to God in this way will indeed "flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD".

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

"The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon" states the Psalmist. With these words, today's liturgy describes the life of the one who serves the Lord wholeheartedly. The one who serves the Lord flourishes and grows in all aspect of his or her life because God continuously renews the life of that person.

The people of Israel went through a lot of threats and challenges but prevailed because of God's love for them. Even as they were exiled to foreign lands, the hand of the Lord was still with them. As children of God we too go through challenges and face difficult moments in our lives. These sometimes make us think of giving up

and withdrawing from the Lord. Difficulties test our faith, sometimes up to the point of losing hope. But the scripture speaks to us today, "On the mountain height of Israel, I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit...." The plan of God for us is to flourish in all we do. In the Bible there are several examples of those who have trusted the Lord, and they flourished despite great challenges. We might think of Joseph, a young man sold into slavery by his own kin, but later becoming a great leader. Job is another good example of one who walks with the Lord and flourishes even after the loss of everything he had. Hannah is a woman whom the Lord uplifts despite her barrenness. Since God's design for us is no different than it was for them, every one of us is called to live a life of faith and confidence in the Lord.

Our response to the working of God in our lives should be like that of people of faith. In his letter to the Corinthians, St Paul invites us to sow seeds of faith on our journey on earth. A seed must be sown before it germinates and blossoms. If we are to flourish as children of God, then we must sow the seed of faith and trust God to grow it for us. There are several areas of our lives which we need to allow God to cultivate and bring about fruit. By bring-

ing God actively into our relationships, in our work areas, in our studies, within our close families, we open our lives for greater things. The growth in these areas of our lives will be determined by how much we trust God, even in little daily chores.

Apart from the areas within our own lives, the Gospel also invites us to collaborate with God to bring growth into the world at large. There are still many souls that need to be brought to God. We need to sow the seed of faith in the lives of others through our witness to life-giving faith. God wants all to flourish, he wants our world to flourish in peace, love and harmony. He wants the world to enjoy lasting goodness, and so he invites us to be part of making his kingdom present. We do this most effectively when we allow our own lives to be transformed by faith, and flourish by allowing ourselves to be guided by God's nurturing power.

PROVERB

*"God
who is cooking,
has not left
the kitchen."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What are the areas of my life where I am struggling now? How can I let God assist me more effectively in these struggles?

Response to God:

My prayers and reflections this week will focus on allowing God influence every aspect of my life.

Response to your World:

I will list my struggles and surrender them into God's saving hands. I will nurture the gift of faith within me, by trusting in his will for me. As a group we will conduct a sharing session discussing our challenges and seeking ways in which we can flourish in and even through them.

PRAYER

*O Most High God,
we give you thanks
for who you are to us.
Help us to grow
in total dependence on you.
Teach us to trust
that you will plant us
on the heights
of progress and growth
in all areas of our lives.
May we be men and women
who bring ever more abundant life
into our society today.
We ask all these
through your Son
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.*