

PARABLES OF GROWTH

ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORD. TIME B 2015

PARABLES OF GROWTH MK 4:26-34

A disposition to listen to others is essential if respect is to be reciprocated. In today's Gospel many of the people hearing the parables of Jesus seemed to ask what he was going on about. And they left it at that. The evangelist tells us that all was explained afterwards to the disciples when they were alone with Jesus. It was a private education for them. The whole purpose of education is to help people to appropriate truths they could never have found out for themselves. We can easily think of our own experience. We think of all we learned and the different people with whom we could relate because we were open to receiving from others the truths they had to share. Sending us to school implied sending us into a world that would prepare us for a vast experience not only inclusive of technical expertise but of human relationships. There were more things to love than we ever could have imagined had we stayed at home in the narrow confines of our childhood.

Jesus the Teacher

Discipleship was a willingness to learn from Jesus and he was a gifted speaker and teacher. He used parables brilliantly to say what the coming kingdom of God was like. He mirrored life just as it was, loving his Galilee with its flowers and lake, and above all the detail and vagaries of the ordinary folk who made up its every day. He spoke of fishers and farmers and housewives, of lawyers and teachers, he spoke of generals and grandees and children, and of trees and animals and birds. He spoke of the Heavenly Father who makes "the sun rise on good and bad alike, and sends rain upon the honest and dishonest." He taught the disciples that 'to love God is to live as his child; to live as a child of God is to treat your neighbour as God treats you' (C.H.Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*, Collins, 1971, p. 65).

Seeming Failure

When Mark presents today's parables it was to make the point that in his own day Jesus was misunderstood, not very successful; he was dogged on all sides. People in his world took a very different stance on what they took God to want for the chosen people of Israel, namely from what Jesus thought the kingdom of God would be like. The Pharisees put all their effort into the strictest observance of the law they had received from Moses.

The sect of Qumran put all the accent on avoiding their fellow Jews and others who did not live up to the standards of purity they had set for themselves. The zealots had recourse to arms, especially against the Romans. They would bring the kingdom about by force. And here is Jesus preaching the imminent coming of the kingdom of God and nothing seems to be happening. Telling them how he himself was dealing with the situation he narrated the parables indicative of patience and growth, in the face of seeming failure. Thus they had to lay aside their prejudices and listen, and learn to see things the way he did. The farmer sows and leaves the rest to God day and night. It is a mystery to the farmer how nature takes its course. A tiny mustard seed is a most unpromising symbol of what God's kingdom might be like- did Jesus have a sense of humour laced with realism? Experience would show that it was not an empty symbol.

An Open Ear

Helpfully Mark tells us that the apostles needed private tutoring to get the picture straight. Listening to him in public with all the rest they could and did say "We don't get it"! In private they did- because he explained it to them, against an historical background they were expected to know. The survival of Israel in the light of past experience was seemingly impossible, after continuous invasion, humiliation and destruction. Yet there they were still. Now the apostles needed explanations, and encouragement to persevere with Jesus. He needed their support too in Gethsemane and he said so. The Passion Narrative was full of realism. What was happening to Jesus looked like a life's failure, to which his disciples had made their uninspiring contribution. Mark knew that after his death and resurrection while the Church was early successful it was early persecuted and that seemed like a failure too. Believers needed encouragement not to give up. St. Mark in recalling all of this is providing that encouragement. So these parables are re-presented, and despite all appearances, because of its perseverance the Church would continue, sowing the seed of the Good News- that God's kingdom comes in God's time, and it is totally in his hands. 'Behold I am with you always even to the end of the ages'.

Conclusion

There is a great deal to be gained from knowing history and not least the history of the church. We in our own days have witnessed the most extraordinary changes. We are constantly threatened by sociological studies and statistics and we are in the gravest