

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to the crowds: '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 air 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.

(Mark 4:26-34)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Parables are very short stories with a double meaning. They act like metaphors and can be interpreted very broadly. To understand the parables of Jesus we must be attentive to both the literal and metaphorical language used.
- The nearness of the kingdom (or reign) of God is the central plank of the teaching of Jesus in Mark's Gospel.
- The term 'kingdom of God' occurs only in the New Testament, but similar expressions are found in the Old Testament. It refers to a time when God's will would be done on Earth.
- Matthew uses the term 'kingdom of heaven' as a way of avoiding the use of the sacred name of God.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Parables provoke interpretation. They make us wonder what Jesus was referring to and what he really meant. At times, he is quite vague about the real meaning and his disciples are left wondering. Think, for example, of the parable of the sower, which Jesus must later explain (Mark 4: 13-20). At other times, like the instances we have in this gospel reading, Jesus is quite explicit: he tells his hearers that he is talking about the kingdom of God. Even so, he must still explain his meaning to the disciples when he is alone with them. Unfortunately, Mark does not report for us what interpretation Jesus places on these parables.

In the Old Testament, the imagery of the reign of God had an apocalyptic dimension; it was to come to fullness at the end times, when the wicked would be punished and the faithful vindicated. Only then would there be a new heaven and a new earth. The message in Mark's Gospel, however, is quite different. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God has already begun. It is among us now. 'This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1:15). Like the seed planted, it takes root and grows mysteriously into something much larger than itself. The kingdom or reign is a gracious gift from God brought near in Christ and demanding a response of faith from those who recognise the truth of his word. The kingdom offers a challenge; like the man who sowed the seed, we must be ready to cooperate in God's work when the harvest time comes.

- The kingdom or reign of God refers to the time when God's will is done. What signs of the growth of the kingdom of God can we discern in our world today? Where do we see God's will being done?
- What things do you think hinder the growth of the kingdom today?
- How are we called to cooperate in God's work? What must we do?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'He spoke the word to them so far as they were capable of understanding it.' How much has your understanding grown so far in your journey?
- Are you ready for the harvest?
- What more needs to be explained to you?
- Have you ever been a part of something that began as a small thing but took on a life of its own and grew much larger? Were you swept away and overwhelmed? Were you able to grow with it and become something more than you ever thought possible? Was it terrifying or exciting? Share your reflections together.
- Be attentive this week to how the seed of God's word and love is growing within you. Foster this growth in as many ways as you can and try to plant the seeds of faith in the hearts of others.
- Use today's gospel acclamation as your prayer this week:

*The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower;
all who come to him will live forever.*

