

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 12-13, 2021

Readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Cor. 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

Our rare June heat wave has done a number on the pristine lawn that graces our campus. While there are many deeper problems in the world, we are hardly alone in justifiably taking pride in our gardens and lawns. I enjoy seeing the flowers springing up and the wonders of nature. Our backyard is resonant with the sound of birds, even if a cardinal made its way into Church and later the sacristy a couple of weeks ago! We think the bird escaped, including with the help of a strategically placed iPhone playing an audio of bird calls by the propped open sacristy door.

On a Memorial Day visit to my brother's cabin, while out for a hike, all around we were surrounded by the tender shoots of the pine trees revealing the new growth of spring. Normally, one would avoid touching a pine tree at all costs due to the sharp needles, but not in late May. They were irresistibly soft and fragrant!

The backdrop of the reading from Ezekiel concerns the failure of King Zedekiah. In those days, the Kingdom of Judah fell under the control of the Babylonian Empire headed by Nebuchadnezzar. King Zedekiah had broken his oath of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar and repeatedly ignored Jeremiah's warnings. Instead, he entered into alliance with the king of Egypt to throw off the Babylonian yoke.¹

The result of all these political machinations was the infamous Babylonian exile. Ezekiel includes the image of the Cedar sprig. It is symbolic of how "the Lord will undo the actions of the Babylonian king by rebuilding the dynasty of King David, so the nations realize that only the God of Israel can restore a people's destiny."²

¹ Cf. Nissan Mindel, *Zedekiah: The Last King of Israel* in Kehot Publication Society

² New American Bible, footnotes for this passage, Ezekiel 17:22-24.

Later in our Gospel, we encounter the image of the Mustard seed. It is a beautiful one for the Kingdom of God because it reveals how the Kingdom can grow, expand, and spread. But this cannot happen if we impede this growth through our unwillingness to embrace the prerequisites of growth. And those concern our virtuous behavior and full acceptance of the Gospel message.

As Catholics, we are both citizens and faithful members of the Church. Actually, we enter into many alliances of sorts. These social or business relationships must be considered from the perspective of how they may affect our life of faith. We live in a pluralistic society and cannot reasonably expect that every interaction is one based upon the tenets of our Catholic faith. And yet, we do have to make choices- some small and others much more significant.

For example, I take seriously the call to some form of penance each Friday. True, outside of Lent, abstinence from meat may be replaced by some other form of penance. But for me, the meatless Friday has been a powerful reminder for many years, along with fasting. Still, I have found myself in some situations where it is nearly impossible to fulfill this without drawing undue attention to myself. Here, eating meat might be the penance! Thus, I'd substitute a different penance.

However, we can also make unhealthy alliances when we place worldly power and prestige over and against our convictions. Many a Catholic salesman has found himself in awkward situations in which he is expected to entertain clients, showing them a good time. What happens when they want to go to a bar and drink too much? Or worse yet, frequent an immoral establishment?

Here, a Catholic must- I repeat **must**- draw a line in the sand. If refusing such activities harms one's career, it must be asked whether that career is worth it? I know some Catholics who have answered a resounding "No." Or better yet, spoke up and changed the culture.

Good for them! Stand tall, stand proud. Do not compromise on essentials, even if you may do so in other prudential matters.

The various images presented in all three readings today coalesce into a vision in which God, whether in separating a tender shoot from the cedar to make the withered tree bloom or in protecting the tiniest seed to facilitate a great mustard plant. In both, God protects the fragile beginnings, so that a stronger and more vibrant reality will emerge. God promised to take back a remnant, the sprig of the cedar, and in the future, make it flourish in its own land.

God protects our fragile beginnings. The Lord will strengthen our weak limbs, enabling our life of faith to bloom and prosper. In the midst of everything swirling around us, we will remain courageous, aspiring to please God above all else.