

## 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time

### Mark 4:26-34

Although the teaching of Jesus was *admired* according to Mark, right from the beginning of his ministry, so far Mark has reported little of its contents. This lack is remedied by his *parable chapter*, which concludes with *the two seed parable* read today. Each gives an image of the Kingdom of God, a concept *never directly defined* in the Gospels, but only described obliquely through Jesus' deeds and words, among which we include these parables.

In the *first parable*, the contrast is between the day-to-day activity of the farmer and ***the silent but unrelenting growth of the seed***. The farmer wakes and sleeps, the seed puts up shoot and ear, and is finally ready for harvest. Only then is it time for the farmer to resume his work. *It could be* a warning to Jesus' enemies (like the Pharisees and the Herodians), that nothing could stop the growth of the kingdom. *It could be* a reassurance to his friends (like the twelve whom he has recently called). Though they seemed to be achieving little, God's work has begun and, despite opposition, will continue. *It could be* a challenge to the impatient of Mark's Church, that God was working in his own time and that they could not hasten the conclusion of his work.

The *second parable* concerns a mustard seed, said to be the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. This time, no emphasis is given to the period of growth. We move straight to ***its final state when it has become the greatest shrub of all***, when all the birds of the air nest in its branches. This fresh version of Ezekiel's allegory could have been a warning to his enemies not to be deceived by the apparent helplessness of Jesus and his disciples. It may have been encouragement to his disciples not to be discouraged by their own small numbers and lack of resources. Such parables are to make the reader think out the meaning of the Kingdom.

These two descriptions of the *silent but unrelenting growth of the seed* and the smallest seed produces the *largest of all shrubs* are example how not only we grow spiritually but also as a community. As long as we don't get in the way of God and let God do his work in us, we will not be disappointed. I have seen this spiritual growth in my formation work with candidates to Marianist Religious Life and other congregations when I was in Africa. It was a privilege to work with the young men who were in formation, especially while they were being educated for their future ministries.

Religious Life is like the military, with all its rules and regulations and doing everything in common like prayers, meals, work periods and even recreation. The first years of religious life the young men enter a period of training something similar to a bootcamp. The Church requires this bootcamp-like formation period of all religious orders, very similar to monastic life, at least for one year.

My ministry in Africa was mainly running the bootcamps. Today's Gospel reading with the silent but unrelenting growth of the seed and the final state of the mustard seed that becomes the greatest shrub of all pretty well describes what goes on in these spiritual bootcamps. All these young men choose to enter into a way of life that will enhance their spiritual life, but it takes years, to be honest. And these first years are the most important, in fact they are foundational.

We teach them everything, as I realized after a few years in Africa, since our religious life was quite a jump higher economically than what most Africans lived, or at least where most of our recruits came from. Rarely did any of the young men come from the big cities, but mostly the rural area, which made up most of the African nations and comparable to the US before rural areas got electricity.

English was at the top of their studies since our everyday working language was in English and would prepare them for collage. Most Africans bilingual and even trilingual, speaking at least three languages even as children where I lived in Kenya. That doesn't mean their English is great, but it would be the language of the house. But to the point, we had to teach them about using everything; electricity, water faucets, the sit-down toilets, since most either didn't have any of the above or their toilets were outhouses with a hole in the floor, everything.

Spiritually, they were definitely at the beginning level, but their families were more serious spiritually and practiced the many Catholic ways of prayer in the home. So, their enthusiasm for the faith made up for everything else they had to learn. That meant the unrelenting but silent growth of the seed of faith, especially for religious life was much quicker. And the big test came after their first holiday home after the first year, two weeks break.

When they came back, I was surprised how disappointed they were, especially with their friends. They said that their friends had changed, became more worldly and

interested in secular things and were reluctant to spend time with them. They felt uncomfortable with many of their friends except for the ones who were contemplating religious life themselves; most parishes had vocation clubs.

Their friends had changed. “No,” I told them, “You have changed! You can not tell the difference since the change is small and gradual over time. But your friends can tell, and you embarrassed them because you are in a better place spiritually than they are!”

But I told them, don’t give up on them, pray for them, for one day you will be that spiritual shrub or tree where they will come to sit and gather in your shade. They will need your spiritual presence and even your words. Without you they will continue to be like the prairie brambles, I don’t know the equivalent, that the wind blows here and there, at the mercy of secular wind with no roots, and no roots mean no depths. Or worse still they might become like thorn bushes irritated by everything and irritating to all those around them.

Through you, they at least may grow roots again, or at least you can trim some of their thorns.