



Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time June 14, 2015 B

Jesus uses parables to explain the mysterious workings of God in our lives

When we read the Gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew, we notice that Jesus frequently used parables as a way to make some point.

British scholar Charles Dodd has given the Church its most classic and enduring definition of a parable. According to Dodd, a parable is:

“A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

Today’s first reading from Ezechiel and the Gospel from Mark seek to engage us with parables. Patricia Sanchez writes:

Parables are specific literary forms, told for a particular religious or ethical purpose in order to provoke thought and challenge their hearers to decisive action. Every parable has two levels of meaning, the literal meaning and the topical or figurative meaning. Whereas the literal meaning is direct and forthright, readers of the parables must allow themselves to be “teased into active thought” so as to deduce the true and deeper, less obvious lesson of the parable.

For example, at first glance, both Ezekiel and Mark appear to be offering their readers some agricultural or horticultural information. But, as is the character of the parable, there is further, yet-to-be-discovered meaning beyond the images of trees and seeds. Those who, in faith, accept the invitation of the parable to look beyond the words and images will find therein a message about the reign of God.

With the help of Scripture scholar Mary Healy, let us now look at the two brief parables in today’s Gospel.

Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29)

“He said, ‘This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full

grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.’”

Commenting on this parable, Healy writes:

*The focus is on the seed’s intrinsic power to grow of its own accord. The sower liberally scatters his seed, then goes on with the routine of his daily life. Slowly, imperceptibly, the seed begins to sprout. The farmer does not know how this happens; even today, with the tremendous advances in microbiology, life remains a mystery. Nor can the farmer control the process. According to its natural stages, **the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain.** The farmer can water, weed, and fertilize the ground as the months go on, but he cannot make the ripe grain appear a day before its appointed time. Farming requires an element of trust and patience. Yet the moment **the harvest** has arrived, the farmer is ready with his **sickle** to reap without delay. The harvest is a biblical image for the final judgment (Joel 4:13; Rev 14:14-15).*

With this parable Jesus explains that the kingdom of God is a divine work, not a human achievement. God brings about its growth, which at times is imperceptible. We cooperate, but we cannot control or hasten the arrival of the kingdom by our efforts any more than the farmer can harvest his grain in January. St. Paul knew this principle well: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth” (1Cor 3:6-7). Every member of the kingdom is being made ready for the harvest by our inner growth in holiness and virtue, which God brings about through our cooperation with his grace. The parable serves as an encouragement for those who think their efforts for the kingdom are fruitless, and a warning for those who think they can bring about the kingdom by their own projects and programs.

Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-32)

“He said, ‘To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.’”

*It is as if Jesus is thinking aloud, searching for ways to help his listeners to grasp the mystery of the kingdom (4:11). Because **the kingdom** is a divine reality, it cannot be defined or contained in human categories. It can be understood only by using analogies, word pictures that force the listener to think and ponder at a deeper level. Once again, the earthly reality most suitable as an analogy to the kingdom is, of all things, a tiny seed. In this third seed parable, the emphasis is on the seed's smallness. For Jesus' Jewish audience, the idea of the kingdom as a seed must have been quite a surprise. A more predictable comparison would be a mighty army (Isa 13:4; Joel 2:11) or cataclysmic earthquake (Isa 29:6). But no, the kingdom is like a **mustard seed**, which Jesus describes (using the device of hyperbole, or exaggeration, for effect) **as the smallest of all the seeds on the earth**. But once sown, it **springs up and becomes the largest of plants** (another hyperbole).*

*In mentioning **large branches** that shelter many **birds**, Jesus is evoking the Old Testament image of a lofty, shady tree, symbolizing an empire that grants protection to peoples of different races and tongues (Eze 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:9). The parable of the mustard seed thus points to the future worldwide reach of the kingdom of God. From its humble, inauspicious beginnings in Jesus' itinerant preaching in Galilee with a small band of followers, the kingdom will mature to an immense tree in whom the Gentiles will find a home. This growth will not be due to human methods but to God's hidden power. Jesus speaks with utter assurance of the future success of the kingdom, urging his disciples to persevere with hope and patience.*

Reflection and application

A distinctive characteristic of Jesus' teachings is their inescapable demand for personal engagement. Jesus speaks in such a way that you cannot "get it" simply by hearing homilies, listening to recorded talks, studying works of theology, or even reading biblical commentaries. The only way to attain full understanding is by coming to Jesus personally and asking him to reveal the meaning. Even today, Jesus welcomes any disciple who comes to him in prayer and says, "Lord, explain the parable," or "explain the meaning of this scripture passage that seems obscure to me." As saints of every stripe, educated and uneducated, have attested over the ages, the Lord will reveal profound mysteries to hearts that approach him in humble faith.

As we continue to listen to Mark's Gospel until Thanksgiving, you may wish to consider purchasing a copy of Mary Healy's excellent commentary on it.

Partners with God

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

There is a version of the creation story that goes like this. When God was creating the world, he did it bit by bit. He made the trees, the grass, the animals, the birds, the fish, and so on. As he was making these things, the angels kept asking, "Is the world finished yet?" To which God would reply with a simple "No."

Finally God made people, and said to them, "I'm tired. I want you to finish the world. If you agree to do so, then I promise to be your partner." They agreed. After this, whenever the angels enquired of God if the world was finished, the reply would come, "I don't know. You'll have to ask my partners."

There is something we can do, and which we have to do. God will not do it for us. Not that he couldn't do it. It's just that he wants us to be partners with him. We have to plant the seed. That's our part. But having done that, we have to acknowledge that we can't do everything. We can't make the seed grow. That's God's part. And God does his part. Any farmer or gardener will tell you that.

So, if there is something which we want to do, or goals we'd like to achieve, let us not sit around dreaming about them. Let us do something about them, even if it's something very small. Let us take that first step. Let us plant one seed. If we do that, then we can be sure that in good time God will see to it that we have a harvest to reap. Meanwhile, as Paul says, "We have to go by faith and not by sight" (Second Reading).

Once, the food buyer for a residential school in Boston went to the Farmers' Market. Passing a stand that was heaped with beautiful sweet corn, the buyer asked the farmer who was selling it, "Did you grow this corn?" "No," came the reply. "I planted the seed."

After gathering in a bountiful harvest, a farmer took off his cap. Then standing in the middle of the empty cornfield, he looked up to heaven and said, "Thank you, Lord, for the fine harvest." And the Lord looked down and said, "And thank you. We did a good job."

We are the work of God's hands, but we are also God's hands at work.

Mrs. Parks lived today's parable in Alabama in 1955

Montgomery, Alabama, 1955. Although 70% of the passengers using the city bus lines were black, the first seats on all buses were kept for whites. And if those seats were taken and more whites got on the bus, black people seated in the rear were forced to get up and give them their seats.

On December 1, 1955, Mrs. Parks, a 42-years-old black woman boarded a bus to go home after a long day

working and shopping. She found a seat at the start of the black section. At the next stop some whites got on so the driver ordered her to get up and give her seat to a white man. She refused to get up. The driver called a policeman. Mrs. Parks was arrested.

Word quickly spread. A meeting was called and Martin Luther King addressed it. They made one basic demand: that passengers be seated on a first-come first-served basis. To achieve this end they began a boycott of the buses. People walked to work.

It was an extraordinary scene. Everywhere the sidewalks were crammed with people walking to work, and the buses went by empty but for whites. The boycott dragged on all that winter, and through the spring and summer of 1956. Meanwhile, the leaders of the movement were arrested. Martin Luther King's home was bombed. Finally, the Supreme Court declared that Alabama's segregation laws were unconstitutional.

Victory was achieved and an unjust situation put right because one day one woman decided to act. The spark ignited by Mrs. Parks started a fire.

This Tuesday, Sisters Joseph and Immaculata leave for their vacation back home in Ireland. I will be leaving on July 30 and Fr. Charles will be here during that time.

Have a blessed week,

Le Fanon