Homily – 11th Sunday in Ord. Time (B)

*Ez: 17: 22-24; 2 Cor. 5: 6-10 & Mk. 4: 26-34*

Our readings today give us three different parables of the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ two little parables in the Gospel are probably very familiar. In the first, he likens the growth of the kingdom to that secret but very powerful transformative growth which turns seeds into a rich harvest, what seems to be dead husk into a source of food, life and rejoicing. In the second, he takes the example of the mustard seed – that tiny seed so beloved of nursery school children growing it on damp cotton wool. That tiny seed becomes the biggest of the shrubs, its growth almost miraculous in its extent, so that it becomes a place of welcome and of refuge.

But the third parable, that from the prophecy of Ezekiel, is probably not familiar at all, even though it sounds so similar to Jesus’ words in the gospel. It is actually the last of three “allegories” or riddles which Ezekiel gives in c.17, and only properly makes sense in its context. Ezekiel is writing in the time of the Exile in Babylon, trying to help Israel make sense of God’s actions towards them in allowing the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people. In the first of the three allegories, he describes a great eagle, which breaks off the topmost bough of a cedar tree and then plants it in rich soil alongside many waters. The transplanted branch begins to flourish, turning – somewhat paradoxically at least from a biological standpoint – into a low vine with new branches and leaves. The vine is always a symbol of Israel. In the second allegory, another cedar branch is planted and starts to flourish, but then turns its shoots towards a second great eagle, different from the first. And Ezekiel asks the question: Will this second branch flourish, or will it be destroyed? Lastly, there comes the prophecy we heard in our reading – that the Lord will take a cedar branch and plant it himself in Israel.

You might, by now, be utterly confused, but the riddles are in essence very simple. The first great eagle is Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, and the first cedar branch is Jehoiachin the last true king of Judah. The cedar is a royal tree, its wood much prized for palaces and the decoration of the Temple, so its topmost branch is the king. It was Nebuchadnezzar who captured Jerusalem and deported Jehoiachin and all the nobles to Babylon where they, and the people deported with them, began to flourish and set down roots. The second cedar branch is Zedekiah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, set up as a puppet king in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. But Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, appealing to the Egyptian Pharaoh – the second great eagle different from the first – to support him in his attempt to be free of the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. But the plan backfired – Jerusalem was besieged and captured and finally razed to the ground, and Zedekiah, having had to watch his sons be killed before his eyes, was blinded and taken bound to Babylon.

That context is what makes today’s passage from Ezekiel so special. For it is no earthly king now who takes the cedar shoot – rather it is the Lord himself. He plants it – not in alien soil – but in Israel itself, a portent of the people’s eventual return. It grows and flourishes and becomes a royal tree – perhaps in earnest that the line of David would spring forth once more. And it offers shelter and rest to all who flock to it. For Ezekiel’s contemporaries, it must have been an astonishing ray of hope in the midst of catastrophe, even if they could probably scarcely believe that the prophecy would be fulfilled. For us, though, it has a deeper meaning – since it is a messianic prophecy, a prophecy of Jesus’ coming, a promise of the Kingdom of God. And perhaps that is why Jesus echoes its words so closely in the gospel.

And what about us? Where do we fit amongst all these shrubs and trees? It struck me to wonder, as I have struggled to prepare this homily over the last few days, whether we are in fact the “birds” in both parables. Like the birds, we did not create the tree which is the kingdom – rather it is the Lord’s own planting, it is he who gave its growth. Like the birds, we do not control the kingdom, but we are welcomed into its shade, welcomed into its branches. Singing together like the birds, we may attract others into this kingdom, not only sharing its fruit, but – nesting in safety – becoming fruitful ourselves. And to push the analogy, perhaps, to its furthest limit, by spreading the fruits of the kingdom as do ordinary birds, we may spread the kingdom itself.

And so, as we meet together for the last time this academic year, let us give thanks to the Father through Jesus Christ his Son, that he has welcomed us into his kingdom, welcomed us to share its fruits at this altar, and let us pray that – like the mystery of the farmer’s harvest – we may ourselves grow and be transformed in the days and weeks ahead, until at the last, we become the harvest of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

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15.6.18

Bidding Prayers: Sunday 11 (B) – 2018

Fr O: God is ever creative. His love renews all things and is the source of our hope. In confidence, let us turn to him in prayer

R: Let us give thanks for the order of creation;

God has blessed us with the resources of the earth and the gift of human life – may we always treat those gifts with generosity and respect.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us give thanks for man’s share in the continuing work of creation;

We rejoice that God has shared with us the gifts of inventive skill and creative vision – may we be led by the gift of earthly beauty to the true beauty of the Kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all the nations of the world:

May those in authority work for peace, justice and goodwill among all peoples.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all who are homeless today, especially here in our own city:

We pray for families searching for a place to live, for refugees driven from their homelands by conflict or economic pressures, and for those made homeless through sickness or addiction.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for the sick and dying, and the faithful departed:

May God, whose first gift to us was life itself, bring all to the fullness of life in his Kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us ask Mary, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, to join her prayers to ours as we say: *Hail Mary...*

Prayer: Fr O