

The Kingdom of God Grows Slowly

Today Our Lord takes up His favorite topic, the Kingdom of God. The Jews at this time are expecting an earthly king, one who will rouse the army of Israel and drive out the Romans and then establish an earthly Kingdom. But of course this is not why Jesus came. Jesus is the eternal King. He came to earth in order to establish His Kingdom, the Church.

At the end of history, after the last judgment, those of us who lived and died in friendship with the King, striving to obey the laws of His kingdom, will enjoy the everlasting peace and prosperity that comes from His rule. This Kingdom is such a high priority for Jesus that He put it right in the middle of the one prayer that He taught His disciples, the core prayer for every Christian: “Thy Kingdom come!”

But since we are fallen human beings, it is easy for us to misunderstand what this Kingdom really consists of. But God has given us all of creation to teach about Himself. That's why the parables of Jesus so often refer to the natural world, to help us understand the nature of God's Kingdom.

The growing parables in today's Gospel passage reveal two essential characteristics about life in the Kingdom of God, two things we need to always keep in mind so that we can live deeply our friendship with the King.

First, the life of our relationship with God comes not from ourselves, but from God. Where does the power of growth in the seeds come from? Not from us. It comes from the Creator.

About the time Jesus was telling the parable of the mustard seed to His disciples, another seed began to sprout just a couple of hundred miles south of here. This seed was also small, so small that if I held it up for you, you would not be able to see it.

But now, two thousand years later, it is still alive and still growing. The General Sherman giant sequoia is the largest tree on earth, and each year it adds to its girth.

The prophet Ezekiel compares the Messiah to such a tree. It is placed on a high mountain, just as the Messiah will be established on the heights but will also grow to be tall and sheltering for all those who can reach its heights.

Other kings will look upon the Messiah's prosperity and realize that it is the Lord who blesses them or lets their lineage fade away, fruitless. Many "birds" will find shelter in this tree, but they must fly very high.

If God were not constantly breathing his grace into our lives, no matter how hard we might try, we would never be able to grow in intimacy with him - just as we cannot make these giant trees grow and prosper over thousands of years.

Our life of union with God depends primarily on God. We cannot achieve Christian success based solely on our own efforts. God is the source of our Christian lives, and no matter how hard we may try to make our lives worthwhile, without his help, we can do nothing.

The second lesson we can take from today's readings is that growth in holiness (life in communion with God) is a gradual process; it takes time.

Christians develop their incomparable wisdom, joy, courage, and self-mastery through a patient and consistent effort to cooperate with God over the long haul. This is hard for us to accept, and it is even hard for us to understand, because our culture has developed such an immediate gratification and impatient mentality.

Look at how we make coffee. Your mother, or maybe your grandmother, made coffee in a percolator. It took 10-15 minutes. Then drip coffee machines reduced that time to about 5 minutes. Now with k-cups we can have a cup of coffee in less than 60 seconds. That's even faster than instant because we don't have to wait for the water to boil.

But developing a beautiful soul, and building up the Kingdom of God, isn't like making a cup of coffee.

It is more like building a beautiful cathedral.

The magnificent Gothic cathedrals that still stand in the European countryside and still leave even the most modern visitor speechless and awestruck, were not the work of a few months or even a few years. They took decades to construct, sometimes even more than a century. There are cases where three or even four generations worked on the same cathedral.

Think about that for a moment.

That means that your grandfather, your father, you, and your children would have all worked on the same building, each one of you for your whole working-life. But only your children would have had the satisfaction of seeing the finished product.

This is an almost perfect analogy for the growth of God's Kingdom in our soul. It's not something we can work hard at, put in some extra hours on the weekend, pull a couple of all-nighters, and then cross off our to-do list. No, it's the adventure of a lifetime, it is our hero's journey, the only journey, in fact, that really matters.

The growth of God's Kingdom in our hearts and in the world depends first on God and then on us, and it is a gradual process that takes time. We may

not see the fulfillment of the Kingdom in our lifetime, that may be left to our children or their children. But that does not mean that our part is unimportant. Our children will build on the work that we do here today.

This is how God teaches patience to an impatient people.

There is an old Hebrew story about Abraham.

Father Abraham was sitting outside of his tent one evening when he saw an old man walking towards him. The man was weary with age and journey. Abraham rushed out to greet him and invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began to eat without giving thanks to God or saying any prayer or blessing. This upset Abraham who finally asked the old man, "Do you not worship God?"

The old traveller replied, "I worship fire only, and reverence no other God."

Abraham was angered at this insult to God and so he grabbed the old man by the shoulders and threw him out into the darkness.

When the old man had departed, God called to His friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I threw him out because he did not worship you."

But God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me at every turn, Could you not endure him one night?"

God is patient with us, allowing us time to find our way back to Him. God designed human nature, and so he understands that our growth in holiness takes time.

He is the wise farmer who tends his crops patiently and carefully, knowing that the harvest will come, with time.

But being human, we experience frustration and discouragement if we do not see immediate results from our efforts. If our prayer life doesn't produce spiritual fireworks right away, if our bad habits don't go away with a snap of our fingers, if we don't understand perfectly all of Catholic doctrine after a weekend seminar, we tend to slacken off in our efforts, or even give up entirely, like spoiled children.

But humble children, who trust in their parents, wise Christians who truly trust in God's action and God's pace, are much less likely to give in to the temptations of discouragement and frustration.

The image of growth, of plants and seeds, isn't just a New Testament image. It's also how the Old Testament describes the righteous and wise believer in the Lord, the one who patiently follows God's lead, trusting that true growth comes from God and advances at God's pace.

And when we truly learn to trust in God, and grow in our love for Him, like that ancient sequoia that is still alive and growing, that growth does not slacken with age.

They that are planted in the house of the LORD

shall flourish in the courts of our God.

They shall bear fruit even in old age;

vigorous and sturdy shall they be.

God created the world to teach us about Himself. If a mustard seed, a cedar, or a giant sequoia can help us to fathom the mysteries of God, what

other things are there, things that we see every day but take for granted, that have the same power?

We live in a world full of wonders. Try to see the world with fresh eyes and ask yourself what does creation teach me about the Creator? How can it bring me closer to God and teach me about the Kingdom?

And in the end, staying as close as possible to God is what really matters.