

The Third Sunday after Pentecost Mark 4:26-34

One of the most widespread myths about the parables our Lord Jesus told is that the purpose of His parables was to make it easy for everybody to relate to His teachings, and understand them immediately. Often this is employed as an argument that in her preaching and teaching and worship, the first and foremost priority for the Church, rather than obedience and faithfulness, must always be that everything be easy to understand and relate to and agree to for everybody, even unbelievers and those unfamiliar with the faith. *Jesus used parables!*, so goes the argument, with the unspoken assumption that this means that the Church should never preach or teach anything anybody might not know already, or anything unbelievers do not believe, nor should worship be conducted in a manner that could come off as strange to those to whom the faith itself is a unknown, as if God were somehow different from ourselves, greater and more important, and holy and majestic, someone whom sinners cannot approach except in reverence and awe, as if coming before Him were a precious privilege granted to sinners only out of His mercy, and at the greatest cost to Himself: the sufferings of His Son - as it is! The Church should *reach out*, it is said; and to *reach out* means to *not* present outsiders with anything they do not already know and agree to, anything that might bring about *change* in anybody, and lead him or her further into a right understanding and knowledge of who God is, how great His salvation, and how He wills for us to live and serve Him. No, for *Jesus used parables!* As we hear it today: *without a parable He did not speak to them.*

But then we also hear that *when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.* So there was more to it than what everybody would understood immediately; His disciples had to have things *explained* to them! The Gospel according to Saint Mark also tells us that He told them that *to you it has been given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables.* So it is not given to all; so that is *not* the point of the parables. In fact, after having told g the very first of His parables, He said: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear!* So He assumed that some did not, and would not. Clearly, our Lord Jesus did not mean to teach nothing more than what anybody will immediately understand and agree to, nor did He mean for His Church to teach nothing more.

This is, in fact, exactly what we learn from the parables we hear today: that His Church need not adapt to the ways of the world in order for His Kingdom to grow, and make sure that everybody, believer and unbeliever alike, will immediately understand and agree to everything about her preaching and teaching and worship, let alone to make sure that unbelievers will come to the faith and be saved.

The Kingdom of God, He says, is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.

O yes, farmers have it easy; all they have to do is to throw something on some dirt, and then sit around and wait, right? Well, we all know that that is not true. But then, that is really not the point, either. Farming has always involved hard work, everybody knows that, and so does our Lord Jesus; after all, God Himself said it to Adam, did He not, that: *Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground.* The point is that the power which makes the seed to grow is in the seed itself; because God created the crop that way, when He made the earth to bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself. And so it is, also, with the Kingdom of God: it has in itself the power of life by which alone it will grow. Such is the very nature of the Kingdom of God; because it is *His* Kingdom, not ours, over which He alone is Lord, and His Church is not, nor are His Christians. It is not in our hands to rule it, nor to bring it about, the Kingdom of God. His is the Kingdom, and the power.

To what shall we liken the Kingdom of God, we also hear today that our Lord Jesus asked, or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade. Again, as the power of growth is in the seed itself, so the Kingdom of God has the power of life in it, which alone will make it to grow. And grow it will, according to what we hear our Lord Jesus saying today: the mustard seed to which He compares the Kingdom becomes a tree greater than all herbs. And so, the Kingdom of God must become the greatest of all - because of the power of life that it has in itself.

But why is it, then, that what we have seen in recent years seems so much more like the *decline* of the Kingdom of God, rather than its growth? Why is it that churches are declining, that Christians seem ever fewer and farther between, and even more so *faithful* Christians for whom the Kingdom of God is the greatest of all, so that they will actually strive and sacrifice to seek His Kingdom and live in accordance with His Word and will? Why is it that God is no longer revered in common culture, rather, the faith is *reviled*, as well as the faithful? Is the current state of things not proof that the Church needs to think out new and different ways to reach out to a new and different world?

Again, the Kingdom of God is *His* Kingdom, not ours. Its fate and future is in *His* hands, not in ours. It is sinful nature in us that makes Christians to panic and forget His promise that the gates of Hell shall never prevail over His Church. And it is ungodliness and unbelief that makes us to make the judgement to begin with, that His Kingdom is declining, because we ourselves do not judge His Church to be thriving and growing, or our own; as if God did not know what is good for His Kingdom, and His Church, and for us. And when we seek to take into our own hands what belongs to God, and to Him alone, we are giving in to the ancient lie of the evil one, that we ourselves should be masters of good and evil.

More importantly, when we think that we need to seek out entirely new ways of doing things to replace what He has entrusted to His Church, in His Word and worship, because we have made the judgement that His Kingdom is declining, because we see the Church losing her standing in society, and because we see our own church declining, and, more importantly, her finances, then we are mistaking our own for the Kingdom of God; we are forgetting that the Kingdom of God is greater than what is our own. Worse than that, we are forgetting that His Kingdom is greater than the success and standing of His Church in society, and in the world, that God has greater things in mind; for He does.

The Kingdom of God is His Kingdom of *salvation*. What He has in mind is the salvation of sinners; and it is of this He speaks also today. More importantly, what He has in mind is *our* salvation. And our salvation *is* more important. It is that to Him; it should be that to us. For our salvation He has set all things else aside. For our salvation the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity, has borne the fullness of suffering, eternal death and damnation.

He who shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead, He has Himself borne the full weight of the judgement of His own goodness against all evil, against ungodliness and unbelief and impurity in our lives, and in our hearts and minds. And this He has done for us, for our salvation. Such is His love for us.

The Son of God has borne the fullness of suffering for us, His own righteous wrath against sin and His holy hatred against evil, in order that we might not perish in His judgement for ever, but rather live and be with Him for ever, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory. And nothing is greater than that. Nothing is greater than His love for us, for you.

In the Word of His love and what His love has done for us, the greatest love of all shines upon us; and as He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, *the Gospel*, that is: His Word of salvation, *is the power of God unto salvation*.

With His Word of the price He has paid to redeem us as His own, He *claims* us as His own; and so we are that, for He has earned for Himself, at the greatest cost of all, the *right* to claim us. And with His Word of His love He shines His love into us and overcomes the darkness of death and disobedience and defiance in us, so that we come to believe in Him, and to belong to Him.

With His Word of salvation, His salvation is given to us, really *given* to us, as we hear His Word of salvation, and take it to heart, in faith. And by His Word of salvation He *makes* us to do that; His Word of salvation is His *power* of salvation. In His Word of love is the power of His love. And nothing is greater than His love for us sinners; nothing is greater than His love for you!

Your salvation is what He always has in mind. For the Kingdom of God is His Kingdom of salvation. What He has in mind is not so much for His Church to be successful in the world, but rather for His Kingdom to grow in us, in His Christians, and in *you*, so that you grow in your knowledge of His love, in your realisation of just how great His love is, and how dependent you are upon His love, and how His love is what you need the most, all that you really need, and all that really matters.

He has *you* in mind; He always does; not just everybody else; not just you *as well* as everybody else, but *you*; your salvation. This is what He has in mind with what we hear today: our salvation; your salvation. As our salvation is always what He has in mind, and yours.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. *Amen*.