

Homily  
June 16, 2024  
11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
21:59 – 34:34

(Father forgot his microphone!) I can assure you that my disrobing and re-robing did not get on the screen. So if you were hoping to see it all over again, the camera focuses on the cantor during the *Glory to God*. For which I am most pleased.

Do you like trees? Are there any here who are professional foresters? Come here, Matthew.

Matthew here prior to becoming a DRE, his college degree is in Forestry. Matthew is many things. He's delightful. He's learned. He's pastoral. But at the same time, if you want to see somebody get really excited about trees, this is the guy. His excitement about trees is second only to his excitement about wrestling. But the Gospel and the First Reading don't speak about wrestling. (Matthew: Too bad...) I know.

He loves to talk about where they grow, how they grow, which is the kind of tree you want to plant here or plant there. What it takes to keep them well. You just go on and on, don't you? (Matthew: Long time) For a long time. You can sit down now. (laughter)

It is delightful when he gets going. I become a sponge.

Why am I mentioning Matthew and trees? Well, our First Reading and Gospel both use trees to reveal

**God in the midst of humanity and that God has a plan.**

We heard of a majestic cedar. And then a small mustard tree. They're both symbols of God's kingdom. The first of a reconstituted people of Israel, Judah. The second of the kingdom of God through Christ.

Our reading from Ezekiel started somewhat strangely. It starts with, "I, too, will plant a tree, or pluck it from the top." This is like my friend, Father Larry, who starts conversations in the middle of the paragraph and expects me to understand everything that went before. But I don't. I listen for a while and then I go, "What are we talking about?"

The section in Chapter 17 of Ezekiel prior to this describes Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, as having taken the first round of the elite to Babylon. And he "plucks" that and plants it there. And yet at the same time, he gets another king appointed in Judah. The king offers him fealty and makes a covenant and then, when Nebuchadnezzar goes away, he betrays him. He makes an alliance with Egypt. So Nebuchadnezzar comes back, destroys Jerusalem and carries that king and all the able-bodied people to Babylon.

Twice now, he has "**plucked**" the leader, the top of the cedar and replanted it.

With that in mind, we come to our reading. “I too will pluck the top of a tree...” And we heard this tree will reconstitute the wonder of Judah and Jerusalem, in a future time.

It’s a powerful image. And that image talks about how all the birds of flight will nest in the branches and the presence of the cedar will continue to remind the world that this is God’s doing. God had a plan. Even though Nebuchadnezzar had his plan, God’s plan is much larger and **it will be**. It will be.

And then we have two parables in the Gospel. The first is about seed. The second is about a tree, a small tree.

Now - this passage at the beginning, where we hear about the sowing and the growing - This is only found in Mark’s Gospel account. The sower and the harvester are the same person, but the emphasis here is on the power of the seed to grow of itself without human intervention.

The farmer does his work and then stands back and has to just let it be. And it says, “He does not know how it grows,” but he fulfills his mission by not only sowing, but harvesting. It is a powerful symbol of the kingdom of God, through Christ.

Now in today’s agriculture, this would not be a mystery, right? Our knowledge is expansive of how to grow things. We can now even manipulate and engineer how we grow things.

But there remains, my brothers and sisters, the ultimate mystery of God’s hand in it all. Especially the hand he has in the marvel of human ingenuity. Our ingenuity finds its gift in God, first and foremost. But you see, the kingdom is about God’s plan. Not ours.

Now, that second tree, the mustard tree. It’s an image of the kingdom of God through Christ. Have you ever had a mustard seed in your hand? If you sneeze, it’s gone. It’s tiny. It’s very light. But it will grow into quite a small tree.

And just like the Lebanon cedar, which was the wonderful branching and shelter for all flying things, so too the mustard tree. Mark the author, the Gospel writer, tells of Jesus saying, this small tree will shelter, shelter anyone, but especially the birds of the air, in its midst.

It’s a marvelous thing to hear that this tiny tree is described as “growing gradually.” It’s not plucked, this one.

This one, it starts to grow and becomes, as the parable tells us, this broad bush, really. And it becomes not only shelter, but safety.

I don’t know if you have ever heard this phrase, “The kingdom of God is already, but not yet.” Is that confusing? You’ve never heard it. Oh, Stephenie, you’re going to go home better informed.

The kingdom of God is already, but not yet. Jesus has begun the kingdom. The tree is growing and sheltering, but it's not complete. The kingdom of God is not full and complete until the Second Coming of the Lord.

And so, brothers and sisters, we benefit from the growing. It's still growing. It's still sheltering. It's still a home for God's people. And the Church, its purpose is to reveal this is already part of the kingdom, and to nurture, to provide the shelter, the safety, the home.

Even though it's "not yet" complete.

Brothers and sisters, by the gift of our creation, the gift of our redemption in Christ Jesus and our sanctification in and through the Spirit of God, we have a shelter in the kingdom and a part in the flourishing of the kingdom.

Which raises some questions.

How do we welcome this gift, this marvel of the kingdom of God in which we take shelter? How do we acknowledge the blessings that come to us because of it? And the connection with our ancestors. And how we grow it – the connections for the future? How do we recognize the share we have in its wonder and mystery and embrace with others?

For you see, this marvel, which I hope we welcome in our lives – this marvel, which is a great blessing to us, which I hope we rejoice in thanksgiving constantly, this marvel is not meant as "mine." Nor is it meant to be "mine and my select few." It's meant for all of humanity.

But if humanity is going to grasp it, we who benefit are called to share it, in our words, our actions, our hope, our questions, our wonder. It is ours to not only benefit, but to help it grow.

So Matthew, I suppose we are all foresters, in a sense. (He gave a thumbs up. This is one of the few times when he's a man of very few words.) So, brothers and sisters, how shall we this week embrace the gift, the marvel of the kingdom of God, as it grows and as we help that growth through our lives?