

Sermon Preached on the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, 17th June 2018, at St John's Timberhill June by Fr Christopher Wood..

[Ezekiel chapter 17. St Mark chapter 4 v26-34]

I'm not in the habit of telling jokes. Some priests love to engage people with a joke. I'm quite wary of it. Too many pitfalls these days.

Let me illustrate. An elderly priest told me one the other day, just after Trinity Sunday in fact. It was about a formidable Bishop going into a primary school at this time of year and asking the class of young children "Now, who can tell me anything about the Holy Trinity?" And into the embarrassed silence a little girl with her hand up whispers..... "*it's a mystery.*"

"What's that?" booms the Bishop. "*mystery*"repeats the girl, with a lisp.

"You really will have to speak up. I can't understand what you're saying" says the exasperated Bishop, and the girl finds her courage and shouts back "You're not supposed to understand. It's a mystery."

And I'm afraid you see, I thought, "Oh Father. You would have to be careful about that sort of joke now. It could be offensive to someone with a speech impediment." You see. It's tricky.

When you tell a joke and somebody simply stares blankly at you, you know they haven't got it; and you know that if you explain it, it might finally just about provoke a smile, but the fun has gone out of it.

On the other hand you might tell a story which seeks to illustrate your point, and it's quite normal then to explain what you mean. The prophet Ezekiel told a story of a powerful eagle plucking the top of a cedar tree and transplanting it to another place, and that was meant to remind his hearers of what had happened when the powerful king of Babylon had exiled the poor king of Israel and brought him to the dreaded Babylon; the story we hear in today's reading from the Book of Ezekiel is of God doing a similar – yet really very different – thing:

God takes a shoot from the top of a cedar tree and plants it on a high mountain, and it becomes itself a noble cedar which provides shelter to many kinds of bird. The explanation isn't a political one, though the hearers may well have hoped that it meant that Israel would be exalted by God and lifted high, and not humiliated by foreign powers and despotic rulers. The point of the story (and it's actually a story about the future; So Mr Trump take note) is that God is the true sovereign, and God alone.

There is a timeless significance in realizing that the people of Israel developed an understanding of God's greatness precisely at the point when they found themselves outclassed by political powers far greater than themselves. Rather than moan about their defeat, or look around and seek an improved God, [and that wasn't as difficult or as unlikely as you might think in the Ancient Near East] they came to see that the God they had always believed in was greater than they had realised, and had purposes beyond what they could comprehend.

The purpose of the prophets wasn't just to warn. It was to make people thoughtful. Which is why we could do with more of them now.

Note that the very high mountain on which God was going to plant this new noble cedar doesn't have a name in our reading, like Jerusalem or Sinai or Zion; it's beyond particular places and political systems, which, by their nature, exclude any other places and systems; the power of God is a power over all, over all reality, including nature, rulers and politics; fundamentally it is a power to make things (and of course people) flourish and show them the peaceful way to find a home.

The parables of Our Blessed Lord are not stories which require an explanation, even though they're sometimes presented as if they were. Some clergy or churches think that is precisely their job, without giving much thought as to why Our Lord very often left them without explanation. Today's two parables simply say something and leave you to get it,.... or not get it....., like a joke.

"This is what the kingdom of God is like". "What can we say the kingdom of God is like?" And Jesus then goes on to talk about familiar things of everyday reality,..... nature doing what nature does. But this is not "just" nature: it's nature seen with eyes which, unlike the crusty Bishop, can spot a mystery: it's not that the growth of the wheat or of the shrub is an illustration of the reality of the kingdom, a kind of visual aid which you could do without if you prefer to describe the kingdom in much more fleshed out and solid real terms.

But what real terms? What could be more real than the miracle of growth which Our Lord has just been talking about? Just let the story of growth be your way into the reality of the kingdom. There is a transformation going on, and maybe we can learn a kingdom frame of mind, a kingdom of God mentality by hearing other stories of transformation, stories of hope; by becoming ourselves stories of transformation and of hope; by sharing hopes with others who long for our world to come alive, to be a home for all. Indeed in our world and even in this city, who simply long for the reality of home.

Do I mean that we must work with others to build the kingdom? No I don't . Absolutely not. We do not build the kingdom; it's not that kind of reality, no matter how many times you hear priests, including me, slip lazily into that sort of terminology.

The kingdom is God's kingdom, not ours. We will only get energised to do useful and creative work in God's name, if we first learn to welcome the miracle of the kingdom over whichwe have no control.

Yes, it's another one of those Sundays when you are being asked to contemplate. To think. And you know, that is really a way of saying "find time to be in God's presence." And do that before you contemplate doing what you THINK God is asking of you.

A little known Carmelite Saint, St Teresa Margaret Redi, used to say. "look at a flower. It comes naturally for it simply to follow the Sun across the sky. Being in God's presence is as natural as that."

What these parables of Our Lord make us think of is life as a gift. [parenthood does the same thing]

In many if not all societies gifts are not really gifts at all; they are part of a system of exchange – think of Christmas presents and cards. My mother has only to open a card and the horror passes across her face as she realizes it's someone she hasn't sent one to and, quick as a flash, a return card is being penned. In some societies this exchange of gifts is really quite elaborate and costly.

But we do encounter people who simply give – and ultimately what they give is themselves. When we encounter real kindness; and the world is full of it.....it just doesn't sell newspapers.....then God's Kingdom has come very close. The kingdom comes as a sheer gift from God.

The wise person, I might even say the Holy person, simply says thank you.

Amen