

Homily:

From our First Lesson, Isaiah chapter 30

“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; Therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.

For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him.”

Last week, Fr. Tate discussed the parable of the vineyard from Mathew 20 and how it enlightens us to the Kingdom of Heaven. This week, in our second lesson from St. Mark, we have another parable from Jesus to consider.

One of the interesting things about parables is their flexibility. Parables can be interpreted on different levels and adapted to different circumstances. The parables of Jesus have been legitimately used by Christian preachers in many different contexts to address various issues that the church has had to deal with from time to time.

If you ask several preachers what a particular parable means, you will probably get several different answers, and they may all be legitimate. As I study scripture, and look at the different literary forms contained within, I believe it is possible to have various interpretations and be able to apply the sacred meaning to various situations.

With that in mind, let's look at one of the parables in this morning's Second Lesson, the parable of the seed that grows in secret.

Jesus may have told this parable originally to support His claim that the climactic moment of history had arrived. God had planted a seed long ago, and for centuries while people were going about their business,

living their life and getting up day after day, that seed had been growing in ways that even Israel could not comprehend.

The prophets had predicted that one day that seed would blossom forth and produce a spectacular harvest. The claim of Jesus, and the theme of His first recorded sermon, was that the time had come. The ancient prophecies were indeed fulfilled in him. The kingdom of God was at hand.

However, soon after that proclamation, Jesus came under pressure by the Zealots to take some militant action against the Romans. Even John the Baptist became impatient with Jesus' apparent passivity. He sent messengers to ask Jesus if He was really the Messiah or not.

In this case, it seems that the parable was also used to advocate patience. The kingdom of God breaks into history on God's schedule, not ours, and it is God, not us, who makes it happen. Thus, it was this that Jesus said to His mother at the wedding feast in Cana, "My hour is not yet here."

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is constantly telling His disciples, especially the Zealots, that His hour has not yet come. But when a group of Gentiles come seeking an audience with Him, He declares that the hour has come, and with that the Passion narrative begins.

Things move very quickly after that. Within a week of His jubilant welcome to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus is arrested, tried by the Jews and tried by the Romans. He is crucified, buried, and raised from the dead. Within the next fifty days, He gives the Apostles their final instructions, ascends to the right hand of the Father, and sends the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the Church.

Since the dawn of time, God has been directing history toward those critical days. Those days are the climax of history, and it is God, not man, who brought it about. As we approach the Lenten season, perhaps it is a good time for us to consider that it is now our turn to act.

In the parable, the farmer does not do anything to make the seed grow. He just waits until it's time for harvest. He then he springs into action, immediately and begins to harvest the fruit of what God has been doing. So, the parable tells us it is time for us, like the farmer, to get busy and gather in with enthusiasm the fruits of what God has done.

Together we have the responsibility to tell the good news of what God has done in Christ and to gather in and baptize those who respond in faith. On the personal level, we who have accepted and rejoiced in the Gospel need to gather into our lives the fruits of it, which include holiness, courage, generosity, and all Christian virtues.

One more thing about the parable we read today. Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus also used the harvest image to depict a time of judgment. What emerges from the ground is not only wheat and corn and other desirable crops, but also weeds, inedible stems and pods that need to be separated out and discarded. We associate that day of judgment with the end of the world.

There is a lot of speculation these days in certain religious circles about when that day of judgment will come. There are all kinds of schemes for trying to predict the end of the world. People associate parts of the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic writings with various events that occur in the news and claim to be able to follow the progress of what is happening beyond what we can see or perceive.

But the farmer in the parable was unconcerned about that, and Jesus specifically told us that we were not to indulge in such speculation. The harvest will come when it comes, and there's nothing we can do to hasten or to delay it. It is God's doing and not ours. We are to go about our business like the farmer, rising and sleeping, watching, and waiting, but not worrying. We don't know what's going on beneath the surface, but we are confident that something is going on and we have faith that God will bring it all to a proper conclusion at the proper time.

The climax of a drama is not the end. It is the point at which the end becomes inevitable. It is the pivotal point that determines what the outcome will be. We teach and believe that the climax of history occurred in the events of Holy Week and Easter. We're still not sure exactly how everything is going to play out, but we are very sure that in the end, good will triumph over evil, right will prevail over wrong, truth will survive, falsehood will perish, and life will overcome death. You can have faith and believe it to be true. You can count on it and rest assured God is in control.

As St. Mark reports Our Lord as telling His followers:

“The kingdom of God ... is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

In other words, the ministry of Jesus, which is symbolized by the seed, will in the fullness of time sprout and grow into a mighty tree, which will be the kingdom of God.

In this way, at the very same time in which God sends His Son to call us to repentance in order to prepare us for the Judgement, He is also laying the basis for our salvation despite that Judgement. In this way, He fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah 30:18. This prophecy is that the Lord waits to be gracious to us, he exalts himself to show mercy to us, for He is a God of justice, and blessed are all those who wait for Him.