

# “The Everlasting Kingdom”

Mark 4: 26-34

Proper 6B, Boise, 2021

The Gospel of Mark, which we read throughout Ordinary Time this year, gives us today a couple of Our Lord’s parables concerning the Kingdom of God, and they are both parables about its growth. God’s Kingdom consists of all those who come under His Reign, which reaches us through His Son, Jesus the Messiah. The number of men and women who have accepted that Reign in their lives has grown steadily throughout the Christian era, despite some declines in particular regions. That is exactly what Our Lord predicted. The Kingdom began small, like a mustard seed, and grew to be a large entity, with many branches supporting much life. We hope to see that process in individual congregations also. One by one they are planted, and the members of each hope and pray that, with the Spirit’s help, they will grow in size and flourish, and in time scatter their own seeds to begin the same process in new territory.

And we should expect the growth of God’s Kingdom, the extension of His Reign, to be qualitative as well as quantitative. Nourished by the Spirit, it should grow in us from the moment of baptism or first coming to faith. As different parts of our life come increasingly under God’s Reign, we produce more fruit with seeds that will take root elsewhere. Such growth in the Christian who is faithful and maintains his or her practice often takes place without his or her even being aware of it. He or she “sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he [or she] knows not how, . . . first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” It grows until it is ripe and ready for the harvest.

The Old Testament reading today presents quite a contrast with this godly Kingdom that spreads by steady and quiet growth. God give Ezekiel the prophet a message with which to warn the pharaoh of Egypt. That warning comes in the

form of an analogy, an analogy that compares two of the most impressive kingdoms of the ancient world — the pharaoh's own kingdom, Egypt, and that of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia, which had, only 23 years earlier, been toppled by Babylon. Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon — each had been dominant in the Near East for a while. On the world's stage, little Judah appeared insignificant beside any one of those powers while it lasted.

Egypt had the longest run. Stretched out 500 miles along the Nile, the population was protected by large deserts on either side, and could be invaded by a more powerful army only from the north through the delta. The irrigated fields, fertilized by the silt left by the river's annual flooding, made Egypt the richest of the nations by far. But how did the pharaohs spend much of that wealth that came from its vast agricultural produce? If any of you here made a trip to Egypt, I'll bet it was mainly to see the pyramids, the most impressive remains of the early civilizations. But let us now remind ourselves what those structures built with huge amounts of labor were for. They were tombs filled with everything the people believed a dead king might need to support him in the afterlife. Never was a kingdom so preoccupied with death as that of ancient Egypt. Whatever of its wealth that was not needed to feed and clothe and house the people and defend them from enemies, was spent on houses for dead pharaohs thought to be gods who looked after the living. And not even the Romans could find a place in their ever-expanding pantheon for the bestial deities of the underworld painted on the walls of those tombs. Such was the glory that was Egypt!

Ezekiel, in the 6th century BC, warned in his prophecy, that Egypt could suffer the same come-down as Assyria did at the hands of the Babylonians. This other nation, which included the city of Nineveh on the Tigris River in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), was the dominant power in the Near East for three centuries. You can view the magnificent place reliefs that its artists carved on alabaster slabs in the great museums — the Louvre, the British Museum, and the

Metropolitan in NYC. Far more impressive in warfare than the Egyptians, the Assyrians were the first to use iron weapons, siege towers, and battering rams. They conquered the whole territory between themselves and the Mediterranean except Jerusalem, as you can read in both 2 Kings and Isaiah, and their empire extended for a time into Egypt. Because of their ruthlessness and ability to inspire terror, many nations surrendered to them without a fight. But no worldly empire is forever. In 610 BC, Assyria fell to the other great Mesopotamian power, Babylon on the Euphrates. And could there be any doubt that Babylon too, after taking over Assyria's Empire, including Egypt, would eventually succumb to another power? It fell to Cyrus the Persian just a half-century later.

Where were the gods of those powerful nations when they needed them? First the Egyptians, then the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians boasted that their gods were more powerful than those of the nations they defeated. If Yahweh was powerful, then why was Judah so little?, they each asked in turn. The Jewish prophets knew better. If a foreign king was able to devastate Israel and take its people captive, it was because God was using him to chastise and purify His people — to teach them to rely solely on Him. As the Psalmist wrote, God

takes no pleasure in the strength of a horse;  
neither does He delight in any man's strength.  
But the LORD's delight is in those who fear Him  
and put their trust in His mercy [Ps 147: 10-11] —

the steadfast love that stands behind His covenants.

Ezekiel wrote down this prophecy while in exile himself. On the eve of Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, God's Reign extended to a few faithful Jews such as he. Yahweh's Kingdom must have seemed at the time to have been reduced to the size of the proverbial mustard seed. Ah, but that seed was alive, and it had all the power of the Creator to guard and sustain it! Babylon fell, and the Jews got back their land — for a time. In a later empire, that of Rome, the seed sprouted among the disciples of the Jew Jesus of

Nazareth. Nourished by the Spirit, it became visible in the days following His death and Resurrection. While the emperors slept, the plant grew, produced buds, then leaves, and in time branches. The Kingdom of God, manifest in the believing remnant of Israel and the Gentiles who joined it, had no earthly power with which to challenge the might of Rome — and it did not seek it. It didn't need that kind of power; for it had been given the Holy Spirit and with it the full power of God. The Reign of God, which is known to us in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, is forever. Whoever puts oneself under that Reign, exercised by His Son, joins the winning side. Such will be evident to all when the Son makes His visible return in glory.

The Kingdom of God grows numerically through evangelism, by our sharing the Good News that His Son has appeared and already won the decisive victory to establish the Kingdom among us. It also grows in each of us when we cooperate with the Spirit He gave at Pentecost. We bring the consummation of the Kingdom nearer whenever we allow more of ourselves to be brought under God's Reign and keep more fully Our Lord's commandment to love one another. This is not a kingdom built on conquest and domination, but one in which we seek one another's good for the purpose of glorifying Our Creator, who made us all in His image.

It is the only society that will last. For, as our Psalm today reminds us,

The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree,  
and shall spread abroad like a cedar in Lebanon.

Those who are planted in the house of the LORD  
shall flourish in the courts of our God [Ps 92: 11-12].

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