

June 13, 2021
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16
2 Corinthians 5:6-10
Mark 4:26-34

“O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon me, O God my Savior!

Taken from the 27th Psalm and written by King David, I think we might all agree that today’s Entrance Antiphon, echoes the heart’s cry of all those who search for deeper spiritual meaning and purpose in life.

Not only is it the cry of any one suffering person, but Scripture also reveals that it is indeed the lament of even creation itself. St. Paul reminds us, “For we know that all created things groan and are in labor until today” (Romans 8:22).

Thus this morning’s Scripture readings address the responses made by God to all who call upon the name of the Lord.

Although entwined in the literary mechanics of metaphor, the OT prophet Ezekiel revealed a very important, while at the same time still yet hidden oracle concerning salvation when he declared,

“Thus says the Lord God: I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot and plant it on a high mountain; on the mountain tops of Israel I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit and become a majestic cedar.”

Now whether the image of the replanted tender cedar bow is a messianic image of Jesus Christ, or an image of New Israel the Church or both, author Diane Bergant states, “the image itself describes one of the basic tenants of Israel’s faith: God chooses the weak of the world to confound the strong.”¹

When life becomes difficult, when the load feels too heavy and/or the way is unsure, you and I - all of us, cherish the assurance that we will be okay, that God hears our voice, that He sees our struggle, and that He will come to our assistance. Not because we deserve it, or because He owes it to us, but rather because He chooses – He chooses to love us unconditionally.

You see, God is not willing that any should perish. Here the word perish applies to much more than just eternal salvation. Why, because a person can be assured of eternal life but may still feel as though they are unable to bear even one bit more trial or tribulation.

Hence the Psalmist wrote, “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me” (Psalm 69:2). Used as the introduction to the daily Benedictine monastic office most monasteries will repeat this verse at least five times each day as they gather for communal prayer. But the pressing challenge for you and me are do we really take this message to heart or are we prone to forget and take matters into our own hands?

Hence Philip Lawrence, OSB, Abbot of Christ in the Desert Abbey in Abiquiu, New Mexico cautioned,

¹ Preaching the New Lectionary, “Year B,” p. 277.

How often do we forget what we are saying? We repeat this opening [prayer] five times a day and yet at times we have no sense of the presence of the Lord. Repeated phrases can become simply a part of a routine. Our challenge as monks and as Christians is to mean what we say. So these five times a day, we want really to call on the Lord and say to Him: "You can help me! Come and help me now."

It is not easy to mean what we repeat so many times. We can only mean such a strong statement if we really believe it and that belief must deepen year after year. We must know that when we call on the Lord, He does answer us. We must have this personal relationship with Him in order to continue to mean this strong request: Come and help me.²

Abbot Philip was correct in stating, "We can only mean such a strong statement if we really believe it, and that belief must deepen year after year." Whether we cry out, "O God come to my assistance," or repeat the prayer responses at Sunday Mass - in order for our faith to grow and deepen we must believe what we pray, take what we pray to heart in practice, and then be willing to accept the assistance of the Lord God in whatever form it may come.

So then whether assistance comes via a personal word, a Scripture passage, or a challenge or a trial, adversity or blessing, how we embrace the answers to our prayers depends on the questions we ask.

² Philip Lawrence, OSB, *Comments on Chapter 18*. <http://christdesert.org/Detailed/888.html>

Please let me explain what I mean by the statement, “how we embrace the answers to our prayers depends on the questions we ask.”

If we were to examine early Church history we would discover that ancient second and third century Christian pilgrims were known to have gone out into the desert to seek a word from the Lord from the Desert Abbas and Ammas.

Wanting to discover the answers to pressing life questions they indeed miraculously received answers – but here is the interesting part - they only received answers to the questions they should have asked. Here the point being - answers make little sense unless they are connected to the right questions.

So then if God chooses the weak of the world to confound the strong as St Paul has indicated, then what exactly does he mean by the weak of the world? Here the blessed apostle Paul gives us a clue worthy of serious consideration in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 when he wrote,

Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, and not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God (ASB).

Biblical scholars tell us that St Paul was here writing concerning the Church, who with Jesus as her head is the fulfillment of

Ezekiel's prophecy concerning the majestic cedar, which when fully grown is able to give aid and comfort to every living creature on earth.

Not that God in any way would limit miraculous interventions by His sovereign hand, - but according to His divine initiative He has given the Church the means and the power to be His hands and His feet extended to those in need. And here it is important to note that the entirety of Scripture supports the notion that God's assistance does not negate human cooperation. In other words, let us not forget that "faith without works is dead" (see James 2:14-26).

Thus Ezekiel finishes his prophetic utterance with these words, "The Lord has spoken it and it is done. Diane Bergant here states and I quote, "This is an example of performance language, the kind of speech that brought light out of darkness, that separated the primordial waters and caused the dry land to appear. The transformation of the tender shoot is but another wonder performed by the sovereign Lord"³ (end of quote).

Now we all know that it is easy to read the Scriptures, listen to its wonderful words of encouragement, and imagine what it would be like to be free from worry and/or concern, but then reality hits home and once again we are faced with the actualities of our sometimes overwhelming circumstances; so what do we do then?

In today's second reading St Paul encourages us to always be courageous, and to walk by faith and not by sight. In other words, it doesn't matter whatever the challenge might be, faith assures

³ Preaching the New Lectionary, "Year B," p. 277.

me that it will all work out for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purposes.

Even if I were to die as a result of any particular challenge, St Paul reminds me that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. As believers in Christ we cannot loose even one single battle, Christ Jesus is always victorious, and the Bible clearly states, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Now I know here many will say, well yes but easier said than done. And they are absolutely correct, it is easier said than done; nevertheless we must realize that in the gardens of our heart weeds will grow naturally, on the other hand spiritual vegetables take time and work to grow and mature. Subsequently, soul friends are needed to come along side to assist us. Some will help till the soil, while some will help plant, others will help water; but God will bring the increase. Yet, how His much-needed grace actually comes to promote healing and growth remains a hidden Kingdom mystery.

Thus today's gospel reading consists of two parables concerning the Kingdom of God. If you recall, parables are in essence short allegorical stories designed to illustrate or teach a truth, religious principle, or moral lesson. They are statements or comments that convey a meaning indirectly by the use of comparison, analogy, or the like understandingly. However, parables can also contain hidden truths that are not easily explained, truths that for the most part require prayer, discernment, and waiting upon God for illumination.

Hence the parables in today's gospel compare the Kingdom of God to the processes of plant growth from seed to resultant fruit. We may observe the planting of a seed and enjoy watching an emerging plant grow from seed to full maturity, but – what is interesting is that the inherent energy or life force that actually facilitates that growth continues to remain hidden, a mystery even to the most brilliant of mankind.

For whatever reason Jesus chose to use a mustard seed to illustrate the Kingdom of God we do not know. However, quite possibly he was recalling Ezekiel's oracle likening the growth of the Kingdom to the cedar shoot planted on a high hill providing shelter to all who come to its branches. Small and insignificant in its beginnings, in selected arid environments the mustard seed can grow into a mighty tree like bush. For example, in places around the Sea of Galilee some mustard plants can grow very bushy and reach the height of 10-15 feet making the mature mustard plant a refuge from the heat for both man and beast.

So then back to our original statement concerning certain life problems beyond our own ability to resolve. Hopefully we are beginning to learn that we can trust God to be available to help when we need assistance. Knowing the fact that God chooses the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and the weak to confound the strong ought to bring a measure of comfort to our particular situation.

Yet needless to say, knowing that God does have a plan for us; however, as we have already experienced, knowing about these principles does not always bring about a resolve to our circumstances, so then how are we to reckon with this dilemma?

Well may we suggest the answer lies within the hidden essence of the parable? The ways of the Kingdom of God often remain a mystery beyond rational explanation. Yet, even though we do not fully understand what makes a tiny seed grow into a mighty bush, or how a cedar cutting can grow into a mighty tree, yet somehow, somehow they do.

Growth is a process and we do have a part to play, but we must, and I say again, we must trust the process and not give up because we fail to understand the hidden ways of God.

Think about it. St Paul wrote to the Roman believers, "For The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but the righteousness and the peace and the joy in The Spirit of Holiness." Quoted from the Aramaic Bible in Plain English we cannot help but notice the emphasis on the righteousness and the peace and joy in the Spirit of Holiness.

God's kingdom principles are empowered in the Spirit of Holiness; hence, all the more reason for us to avail ourselves of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. God does come to our assistance. Certainly these two beautiful Sacraments were given to aid us in the pursuit of holiness; thus unlocking the supernatural regenerative power of the Kingdom of God.

Again, how and why it all works remains a supernatural spiritual mystery. Yet it is still true, if we will call upon the name of the Lord in contrite contrition, and in faith receive Him into our hearts He will come and reveal His Presence to us. Indeed, He is here even now.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.