

Homily of Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, 2024

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

Today's readings remind us of a saying: "Bloom where you are planted," attributed to the Bishop of Geneva, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). All the readings speak of planting, blooming, and yielding fruit.

The first reading is Ezekiel's prophecy about the return and restoration of Israel after the Babylonian captivity. "Thus says the Lord God: I, too, will pluck from the crest of the cedar the highest branch. From the top a tender shoot, I will break off and transplant on a high, lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel, I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar" (Ezekiel 17:22-23).

The imagery in the first reading is powerful and of particular importance: The crest (branch) of cedar is planted on a high and lofty mountain, and it becomes a majestic cedar. The branch of cedar does not wallow in self-pity and complains: "Others are planted in rich soil, and I am planted on rock; for that reason, I am unable to bloom and bear fruit." Rather, it puts forth branches and stretches its roots through the cracks in the rock and finds water and nutrients and survives and bears fruit.

The second imagery is in the gospel reading: "This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land ... the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear" (Mark 4:26-28). Note, the seed is scattered (cast, thrown, spreads), not sown! Again, the seed does not become envious and give excuses: "For others, the soil is tilled and plowed, and I am scattered on the land; for that reason, I am unable to bloom and bear fruit." Rather, of its own accord, it sprouts and grows and yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

The third imagery is also in the gospel: "a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade" (Mark 4:31-32). The mustard seed does not feel worthless and complain that it is the "smallest of all the seeds on the earth." Rather, "it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade."

A lot of times, it is not what we have that matters but what we are able to do with what we have. Some people have little and achieve much; while some people have much but achieve little or nothing. Someone says, "Life is one percent what happens and ninety-nine percent how you respond." Another says, "Life isn't about what happens to you, it's about how you handle what happens." Yet another says, "Never let a bad situation bring out the worst in you. Be strong and choose to be positive." For some people, stumbling blocks are stepping stones to success. While for some people, stumbling blocks are tripping stones to failure.

You and I are the branch of cedar. We are the seed scattered on the land. We are the small mustard seed sown in the ground. Every aspect of life: family life, vocation, ministry, job, profession, stud, business, responsibility, and so on have their difficulties and challenges. We are all encouraged to be resilient, to stretch out, to break through, and to break out. Self-pity, excuses, discouragement, envy, helplessness, and quitting are never a solution. These only result in self-defeat. We must try to bloom where we are planted, whether on rock, or on the land, or in the ground.

The second reading urges us, "Brothers and sisters: [Be] always courageous ... [and] walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:6-7). Those who walk by sight are those who are overwhelmed, disheartened, demoralized, and who quit in the face of the challenges of life. But those who walk by faith are those who have faith in God and who believe in themselves.

We are to make the best out of every situation we find ourselves. Where there is a will, there is a way. Our God who has planted us on a high and lofty mountain, or scattered us on the land, or sown us in the ground will not abandon us. God's grace dwells with us wherever he plants us. All we need to do is to cooperate with God's grace. Let us walk by faith: faith in God, and faith in ourselves, and be courageous. We pray with St. Paul, "My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Amen.

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