

A Little Mustard Seed and Some Leaven

Homily on the Saturday before the Nativity of our Lord (2020)

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On the Saturday before the Nativity of our Lord, the Church sets before us the reminder that the kingdom of God is likened to a little mustard seed and some leaven.

What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.” ²⁰ And again He said, “To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” (Lk 13:18-21; see also Mt 13:31-33, 54-58; Mk 4:30-32; 6:1-6; Lk 4:22)

Like a little mustard seed or some leaven, the kingdom of God begins small, seemingly insignificant and inconsequential by the valuations of the world, then grows and expands in such a way that it becomes a place of refuge for the displaced, a haven for the storm-tossed, a home for wanderers.

The kingdom has these characteristics because the King himself has them. Our Lord, the Creator of the universe, enters the world as a homeless little baby in a cave for animals—unnoticeable, small and seemingly insignificant. Apart from the special revelation to the shepherds and the wisemen, there would be no fanfare for the events that anyone could observe (apart from Mary and Joseph, of course).

The situation is similar for the first thirty years of Jesus’ life. Other than the unusual events in the temple when he was twelve years old (Lk 2:41-51), we’re told of nothing unusual about his life prior to his public ministry. He “increased in wisdom and in stature and favor with God and man” (Lk 2:52), as one would expect of a child being raised in a first-century devout Jewish family. And, at the outset of his public ministry, the palpable surprise of his fellow townsmen indicates that the first thirty years of his life didn’t lead them to suspect anything unusual about him—so much so that they, while astonished at his teaching, took offense at him.

Jesus ..., coming to his hometown, taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him. (Mt 13:53-57; *cf.* Jn 6:42; 7:27-28).

When the lack of notoriety is displaced by his authoritative teaching, he becomes despised and rejected. Who wants to be taught by a mere carpenter's son? Where are his teaching credentials? Under what rabbi did he study? This negative valuation of Jesus by worldly standards was poignantly foretold by the prophet Isaiah:

For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Is 53:2-3)

A humble birth and an unremarkable youth gives way, when all is said and done, to rejection by his own people--but not only by his own people, but by all of us--even to the point of death. For Isaiah continues:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. (Is 53:4-7)

Our griefs. *Our* sorrows. *Our* transgressions. *Our* iniquities. Jesus isn't simply ignored, rejected and crucified by others long ago, but by us today as we live by the values of the world instead of the values of the kingdom. In this way, then, Jesus' insignificance by the world's standards begins with a homeless birth in a cave for animals and culminates in an ignominious death fit for criminals. In the world, death is the ultimate expression of the *meaninglessness* of life.

Our Lord's death, however, is precisely the manner in which he reveals that death is not *ceasing* to exist but rather is *a passageway* into a fuller and more communal existence. He destroys death by his death, making our death the ultimate expression of the *meaningfulness* of life. Jesus foreshadows this teaching in the Gospel of John: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12:24). In the kingdom, life and growth arise from death. Our Lord's death, one among thousands of violent crucifixions under Roman authorities, is uniquely followed by his resurrection.

Christ's resurrection, however, is not in itself what opens the doors to the kingdom. After his resurrection, the disciples are as confused as they were before his death. Their confusion culminates when, after being taught by Jesus for forty days about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), they express their final words to him before his ascension: "Lord, will you restore the kingdom to Israel at this time?" (Acts 1:6). They are still looking for an *external* kingdom, for their circumstances to be fixed to make their lives easier.

Everything changes ten days later with the coming of the Holy Spirit. They continue to preach the kingdom (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31)--no longer as the political reign of God over the earth but his reign over our inner lives: "The kingdom of God ... is righteousness and peace and joy *in the Holy Spirit*" (Rom 14:17; emphasis added). This life of the Holy Spirit expanding the kingdom within us is the very fruit Jesus promised to those who have had the seed fall into their heart and be buried there: "love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). This is the fulfillment of our Lord's teaching that the kingdom of God is within us (Lk 17:21).

Similarly, Christ himself is the leaven that, upon entering us, infuses our entire being with his presence. St. Ambrose beautifully describes it this way:

The holy church is prefigured in the woman in the Gospel. We are her flour, and she hides the Lord Jesus in the inner parts of our mind until the radiance of heavenly wisdom envelopes the secret places of our spirit. ... There are three measures: of the flesh, of the soul and of the spirit. ... The woman, who prefigured the church, mixes with them the virtue of spiritual doctrine, until the whole hidden inner person of the heart is leavened (1 Pt 3:4) and the heavenly bread rises to grace (Jn 6:31). (Exposition of the Gospel of Luke, 7.187,191-2, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, Vol. III, p. 228)

St. Cyril of Alexandria similarly explains this imagery as revealing the process of *theosis*, our deification: "The leaven is small in quantity, yet it immediately seizes the whole mass and quickly *communicates its own properties to it*" (Commentary on Luke, Homily 96, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, Vol. III, p. 228; emphasis added). The kingdom that began in us as a little leaven transforms our entire being—body, soul and spirit.

It is precisely the growth of this kingdom within us that makes us truly available to others, a receptacle of love, of the God who is love (1 Jn 4:8,16), for he has renovated his dwelling place within us to shine forth the fruit of the Spirit. We come to be able to attentively listen to others without judging them, to compassionately suffer with them without blaming them, to gently carry their burdens thus fulfilling the law of Christ and not our own aspirations. The kingdom of

God within truly becomes a place for the birds of the air to come make their nests, that is, for the weary to come and find rest. And, in so doing, we become co-workers with Christ who invites us all: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

In this way, the life of the expanding inner kingdom is not a life isolated from others, but profoundly communal—a divine community, an entrance into the life and love of the Holy Trinity (Jn 17:20-26). This is what we see happen immediately after the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and their preaching of the kingdom.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common.⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

The kingdom that starts as a little leaven in our hearts so fills us that it pours forth into a communal life that proclaims at the outset of our liturgical gatherings, “Blessed is the kingdom ...” We each come to the Divine Liturgy as a living stone, being fitted together into a living temple, whose cornerstone is Christ and in which our worship is united with the worship of the heavenly bodiless powers and the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us (1 Pt 2:5; Eph 2:19-22; Heb 12:1-2).

The God who comes to be born in Bethlehem and buried in Jerusalem longs to be buried in our hearts so that we might be born in the Spirit, who establishes and expands the kingdom within us so that we might become a place of refuge for a hurting world. We will prepare day by day for the coming celebration of our Lord’s Nativity, and many of the things we will be doing will be preparing for a festive occasion that the world completely understands—trees and lights, celebrations and presents. But let us, in the midst of all our visible and festive preparations, remember to cherish in our inner and hidden life the presence of the Lord whom the world doesn’t notice. Let him be born anew in the cave of our hearts. Let him grow and expand his reign throughout our entire being. And let us together become a communal haven to the weary world.

+++++. Miscellaneous thoughts +++++.

The anti-world approach is well expressed by Maximus of Turin (+ 408-423):

Born a man, he was humbled like a seed and in ascending to heaven was exalted like a tree. It is clear that Christ is a seed when he suffers and a tree when he rises. He is a seed when he endures hunger and a tree when he satisfies five thousand men with five loaves. In the one case, he endures barrenness in his human condition, in the other he bestows fullness by his divinity. I would say that the Lord is a seed when he is beaten, scorned and cursed, but a tree when he enlightens the blind, raises the dead and forgives sins. (ACCS NT III.228; Sermon 25.2)

Ambrose (the mustard seed of faith): If the kingdom of heaven is as a grain of mustard seed, and faith is as a grain of mustard seed, surely faith is the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of heaven is faith. One who has faith has the kingdom. (ACCS NT III.227; Exposition on the Gospel of Luke 7.177)

Cyril of Alexandria (leaven): The leaven is small in quantity, yet it immediately seizes the whole mass and quickly communicates its own properties to it. The Word of God operates in us in a similar manner. When it is admitted within us, it makes us holy and without blame. By prefacing our mind and heart, it makes us spiritual. Paul says, “Our whole body and spirit and soul may be kept blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 5:23).

Ambrose (the woman as church): The holy church is prefigured in the woman in the Gospel. We are her flour, and she hides the Lord Jesus in the inner parts of our mind until the radiance of heavenly wisdom envelopes the secret places of our spirit. (Exposition of the Gospel of Luke, 7.187). ... There are three measures: of the flesh, of the soul and of the spirit. ... The woman, who prefigured the church, mixes with them the virtue of spiritual doctrine, until the whole hidden inner person of the heart is leavened (1 Pt 3:4) and the heavenly bread arises to grace (Jn 6:31). The [teaching] of Christ is fittingly called leaven, because the bread is Christ. The apostle said, “For we, being many, are one bread, one body” (1 Cor 10:17). Leavening happens when the flesh does not lust against the Spirit, nor the Spirit against the flesh (Gal 5:17). We mortify the deeds of the flesh (Rom 8:13), and the soul, aware of the breath of life, shuns the earthly germs of world needs. (Exposition, 7.191-2; ACCS NT III.228)

Jesus doesn't use the ways of the world — military power, political influence, and financial status -- to establish his kingdom as a rival to the ways of the world. The path our Lord took in this world is the path his followers are called to take. The worldly insignificance is not simply for our Lord, but for each and every one of us. Indeed, his methods seem silly and foolish by the world's standards (1 Cor ???): be humble; be crucified; die for the other; don't worry even about

your most basic needs. The need to be planted into the earth—to take up our cross, to die daily, to carry about the dying of Jesus in our mortal bodies that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our ????. This is how the life, the growth, and the fullness of the kingdom can be manifested in each and everyone of us. The seed that is planted in the earth, our Lord himself, is planted in our hearts. Baptism—from an outward and observational standpoint—looks pretty insignificant in the world’s eyes: plunging someone under the water three times. What difference does that make? We’re more interested in the cute baptismal gown and the reception afterwards. Anointing with a little oil—nothing in the eyes of the world, but the seal of the Holy Spirit with the eyes of faith. Consuming a little bread and wine, inasmuch as the world can see, but life-giving body and blood for the unworthy who receive in faith.