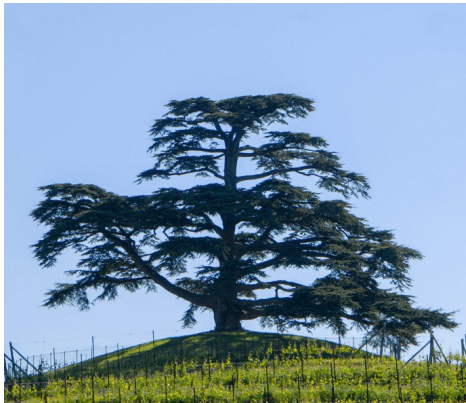


PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES
ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

First Reading Ezekiel 17: 22–24

Ezekiel was a prophet and a priest who followed his people when they were exiled in Babylon in 597BC. They were living in the area which is now Iraq. He brings a message of hope that God will look after them. The exile is not the end. The Lord is still speaking to his people.

Ezekiel thought that the leaders of his people were irresponsible and unwise. From the beginning of this chapter, he has used allegories to explain the contemporary political landscape. In effect he was saying: 'The situation we find ourselves in at the moment is like ...'



Cedar of Lebanon

In the passage for today, the image used is that of a new shoot of the cedar tree – representing a new line of Kings for Israel – which would be planted on a high mountain – i.e. Zion in Jerusalem.

There are many tree images throughout the Old Testament, from the trees in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2–3) to the new shoot springing from the Jesse tree (Isaiah 11: 1).

Similarly, in the New Testament Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a tree (see today's Gospel).

In a reversal which reminds us of Mary's Magnificat: '*He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away*' (Luke 1: 52–53), God promises to exalt the powerless and curtail the powerful: '*I am the one who stunts tall trees and makes the low ones grow*'.

These 'word images' help the reader understand the nature of God and his work throughout Israel's history.

Gospel Mark 4: 26–34

Jesus uses the stories of the seed growing by itself and of the mustard seed to give his audience an inkling of what the Kingdom of God is like.

The Kingdom of God

For today's readers, used to democratic systems of government, it can be very difficult to appreciate fully the concept of living under the rule of a Lord and King. The Kingdom is perhaps best understood not as a place but as a set of values and relationships between people, where justice, love and goodness prevail.

The parables

Parables are multi-layered, thought-provoking stories, with a twist which the listeners must work out for themselves. Once we understand them, parables challenge us to try and change the way we live. There are about forty parables in the Gospels.

The parable of the seed

This is the only parable which is unique to Mark. Jesus uses images drawn from the Palestinian agricultural world which his audience could readily understand. Some scholars have seen in the image of the seed an example of the Word of God, of Jesus Christ, leading an insignificant life – but whose following grew inexorably to form the Christian Church. Indeed, it is possible to see parallels between the apparently dead, dormant seed and the eventual growth of the plant and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Of its own accord ...

The Greek word used is *automaton* which has given us the word 'automatically'. In the same way, the Kingdom will grow from hidden beginnings, even if at times we may feel it is still a long way off. Patience is required.

The mustard seed

Botanists agree that the mustard seed is not in fact the smallest seed. Although very small, it seems that some orchid seeds are smaller still, but were not known at that time. The main point here is not the actual size, but the change in size from very small to very large, between what is and what will be.

... puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade

Some scholars see here a reference to Ezekiel's story of the birds sheltering in a cedar tree on the high mountain of Israel (today's First Reading). Others see parallels between the lowliness of Jesus's ministry (the mustard seed) and the Kingdom of God encompassing all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike (the grown bush).