

Parables

Over these last two Sundays of July we meet parables spoken by Jesus to his disciples and recorded for our benefit as well. You can read them two ways. First in a detached way, the way you read something on a page held at a distance from your eyes (and soul). As a mere observer you can read “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed or like yeast . . .” and try to imagine the tiny mustard seed grow into an impressive tree; or the yeast make dough rise into a delicious, homemade loaf of Italian bread such as my grandmother used to make.

Or you can eliminate the distance between you and the page. In other words walk right into the parables as Alice walked into a mirror and found her room reversed – as you walk right into a grand cathedral, beyond its façade, and experience a different world. For instance when today’s Gospel speaks of a field into which someone has sown weeds, if I let myself enter the story or let it enter me I might think: In the course of my life much good stuff was sown in me, my mind, my imagination – that motivated me to want to learn more, to be attuned to great ideas, skills, awe at things natural and man made – that humanized me.

But I was also influenced by the polarities of politics, of cynical “authorities”, questionable pieties, commercial seduction, films issuing from the small minds of so called artists – a gunfight every ten minutes, chauvinism. Weeds were sown in my mind, my field, choking the good stuff, questioning it not with an intention to educate but to tear down. And yet it was good that the Lord let me experience the bad seed – because the negative stuff may ultimately confirm me in the good. So, see? The parable tells me so much about myself, my life, about hope.

Or I am a mustard seed, tiny (one to two millimeters in diameter) within my shell, buried, out of sight. But gradually I experience my shell cracking open, my vital kernel pressing out, always, even now, reaching out, emerging from the soil – I feel planted, open to the sunlight, the dew, the rain, the nutriments of God’s world – sacraments. I begin to grasp things, to take root in the good things of my culture. I reach for the sky quietly, without commotion day after day. I sprout leaves, so many tongues to taste and see that the Lord is sweet. I acquire a zing, become spicy in the best sense of the word, great to spread on a hot dog! That’s me! That’s me planted within the kingdom of God, an environment of life and grace - gustoso, pleasant to others.

The parable is about how your life can be ever far reaching, becoming a social gathering place, as for “the birds of the air” wherever you may be. Or you can identify with a smidgen of yeast buried in a lump of dough. When I entered the first grade did not my teacher, a Catholic nun, tell me that? “Geoff, you are a lump of dough, heavy to handle, malleable, easily shaped this way and that, cold – but I’m going to place this pinch of yeast (the word of God) deep into your little mind – and by this time next year you will have risen into a nutritious little fellow after all – or I’ll eat my coif. “

Try that whenever you are confronted by a parable of Jesus. BE the mustard seed, BE the yeast-empowered dough, BE a treasure buried in a field, BE an expensive but as yet undiscovered pearl, BE a net thrown into the sea . . . Indeed, let's play around with more of these parables next week.