

XI ORDINARY TIME– 13th June 2021

THE MUSTARD SEED....IS THE SMALLEST OF ALL THE SEEDS ON EARTH, YET WHEN IT IS SOWN IT GROWS UP AND BECOMES LARGER THAN ALL THE GARDEN PLANTS – Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 4,26-34

And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

To help the disciples and the people understand the newness of what he brought, that of the kingdom of God, an alternative society where it is God, the Father, who governs men by issuing no laws that they must observe, but communicating his love to them, Jesus uses parables and in Mark's gospel chapter 4 from verse 26 we find two of these. In the first Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a man who sows the seed on the earth; the seed already in the fourth chapter was presented as Jesus' message. What does Jesus want to say to us? That man and the message are made for each other: if there is no encounter they remain sterile, but when they meet in man, they free the energies that in contact with this word, with this message, all the potential in man is freed, right up to the fullness of maturity.

And Jesus continues speaking of this growth, which is normal and even spontaneous, of the stem, the ear and the grain. Then there is an image that must be understood in the agricultural culture of time that of the sickle and the harvest. The life of the peasants was terrible, it was suffering and pain. One of the few moments of the year that was of great joy was that of the harvest: the neighbours and relatives were called, all collaborated together and it was a great celebration. In the Psalms the harvest is always associated with joy. So what does Jesus mean? That when the man matures himself, he also reaches the fullness of joy; so here is the image of the scythe and the harvest.

Then Jesus distances himself from the nationalistic and triumphant expectations of this kingdom of God, he distances himself from an image of the prophet Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel in chapter 17 thus imagined the kingdom of God: a cedar, the cedar is known to be the king of the trees, which grows on the highest mountains in Israel. Something extraordinary, something that attracts attention even from afar for its magnificence. Instead Jesus says, not at all, “...the kingdom of God,It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground..” here one expects it to be planted

amongst the plants in the garden. So it's not something flashy, but it's something common, normal. That is why we are here in our garden, this is a mustard seedling with its beautiful bloom. In Palestine, in the lake of Galilee, where conditions allow it, it reaches up to two meters in height and here is the collection of its seeds, which are tiny, they are truly microscopic, but they have this particularity: being small, the wind spread them everywhere. So what is Jesus saying? The kingdom of God, even in the moment of its maximum development, of its maximum growth, will not be something that will attract attention, extraordinary, but this, a common thing, in the garden of the house, but it will be effective.

And then Jesus gives an important detail, he says that “...*the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*” because the branches of the mustard tend to be large . But why the birds of the sky? Because they were considered useless and despised animals. Then Jesus announces that the kingdom of God is aimed precisely at those who have been marginalized, despised, estranged from religious institutions and from society and in the kingdom of God they will find their breath and their relief.