

Homily for 11th Sunday B

On this eleventh Sunday of ordinary time, we are reminded of the kingdom of God. The first reading is a message of hope, liberation and restoration. God wishes to transform and transfer his people from a kingdom of oppression, poverty and austerity to a kingdom of peace, justice, and prosperity. This is the kingdom where God wishes us to be. The visible sign of this kingdom is the church to which all people come to seek refuge. In the second reading, Paul reminds us of the fact that we are on a journey towards the kingdom of God where Christ is. The journey to this kingdom is a journey which must be approached with faith. In the gospel of today, Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God narrating to us two seed-parables. In both there is an element of surprise. We do not know how the seed grows.

One of the situations of concern in the contemporary society, I think, is the loss of the sense of symbol – a discomfort with the language of symbolism, particularly in matters of religion. There are very well-intentioned Christians who don't seem to hear the linking word 'like' in the preaching of Jesus. They make no distinctions between analogies and truth-claims. But without much thought 'absolutise' the images. *Some years ago, one Pastor died from a rattlesnake bite during an outdoor church service just because he failed to accept the language of symbolism in Mark 16:18 (which says, "They will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison"). He was only 44, in death followed his father who also died of snakebite in the context of practising his 'faith' among the sect of "Serpent Handlers"!* On the other hand, we also have the group of very rational people to whom the symbolic language of religion seems only irrational. They are both idolatrous. They have reduced images to reality. One group absolutises symbols and deprives the symbols of their depth, and the other group absolutises the symbols and throws them away. *Once a lady knocked on a man's door and said, "Do you own a black Pit Bull dog?" The man said, "Yes." Well, the lady said, "I have to tell you, it's dead." The man demanded, "What do you mean it's dead? What happened?" And the lady said, "My tiny dog Pekinese killed it." And the man said, "Your Pekinese killed it? How?" She said, "It got stuck in his throat."*

The gospel text of today invites us to be open to accept that we really cannot know everything about the kingdom of God, and the only meaningful way of speaking about the Kingdom is by means of symbols, parables, metaphors. Why parables, symbols, metaphors? Symbols are the meaningful expressions of mysteries. And matters of the God and His presence are mysteries. Symbols allow paradoxical expressions. They are never complete. Yet they are rich. They invite us to add to them. They evoke emotions. They bring people together in a common search. They help us situate ourselves culturally. They provide identity to our belief and belonging. And this is the function of an authentic religion: to foster our search for God. And the language of symbols seems to be the most meaningful way of approaching the Divine. Tony de Mello has this powerful aphorism: When a teacher points out at the moon, a wise child looks at the moon, a naïve child looks at the finger! Religious symbols, including the parables of Jesus, point out at the Divine – God and His reign! Yes, are we ready to be surprised by God? Being humble enough to be surprised by God, I think, is the antidote to idolatry.