**Homily for 11th Sunday Yr B June 17th 2018**

**Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:2-3,13-16; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34.**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The prophesy of Ezekiel which we have just heard may seem like a nice story about the growth of a cedar cutting, but of course it is not. It is a proclamation of abiding faith in God’s promises to His people despite their present desperate circumstances. When Ezekiel wrote these words, the great kingdom of David and Solomon had first been split in two and then decimated. The Northern kingdom of Israel had been completely picked apart and overwhelmed by the Assyrians and all its people deported. The Southern kingdom of Judah was leaderless with all its leaders, including Ezekiel himself, deported to Babylon. In a few more years Jerusalem itself and the Temple would be completely destroyed. Yet in the midst of this disaster and this crushing defeat, the prophet still proclaimed God’s promise to raise up from the ashes of the House of David, a new king who would reign over an international kingdom. The ‘cedar tree’ is the Kingdom of Israel; the ‘highest branch’ is the royal House of David; the ‘shoot’ is an heir, a Son of David who will be planted on the mountain heights of Israel (that is, in Jerusalem) and there a new kingdom will grow to greatness. All the other trees of the field, in other words all the other nations, will learn that God is the one who makes His Kingdom grow. The Lord has spoken. He will do it!

Fast forward some 600 years and Jesus bursts on the scene in Galilee of the Nations proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is very near. He teaches His followers to pray for its coming and He speaks in parables to explain what this Kingdom is and how it is to come. In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like a seed. A very insignificant little thing which seems to die and is buried, but, by a mysterious power, hidden and unseen, it starts to grow. It pushes out a little shoot and then grows and grows. Even the tiny mustard seed grows to a great bush in which the birds can find shelter.

This parable of the Kingdom is a prophesy of the Church. Although Jesus attracted great crowds by His preaching and His miracles, by the end of His public ministry He had a very small following. At Pentecost there were only 120 gathered in the upper room. Over the next three centuries, that miniscule group had turned into millions. What was seen only as a tiny splinter group of a fringe religion within the mighty Roman Empire came to take that Empire over. In a sense, the Church replaced the Roman Empire, but it did it in a very strange way. The hard power of the Romans was conquered by the love of Christ!

In his very enlightening book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, American historical sociologist, Rodney Stark, points out that neither the spectacular public miracles Jesus performed, nor the eventual conversion of the Emperor Constantine 300 years later appear to be responsible for this phenomenal growth of the Church. Throughout these years membership in the Church was illegal and Christians were regularly being martyred publicly for the amusement of crowds or tortured in private and could have all their property legally seized by the state. Despite this very high price of membership, the Church grew because its members, through the example of Jesus and through His intercession, were able to love one another and love outsiders too, with a transcendent love.

In those years, the Church existed primarily in households of faith. These heroic families turned upside down the values of the Roman state. Where Roman society disrespected women, the Christian families honoured and protected women. In a society where crude abortions were common and unwanted infants were left to die, the Christian community welcomed children. In the Roman cities where most occupants were uprooted from their families and homelands, the Christians welcomed strangers.

There were two plagues which ravaged Roman cities in those years of persecution. When pagans got ill, it was common for their families to abandon them and flee to the countryside to escape the contagion and death. Despite the risks, Christians mainly stayed in the cities to look after their own sick and their pagan neighbours as well. Their loving nursing care and their faith-filled prayer caused many stricken people to recover. When Julian, one of Constantine’s relatives became emperor, he renounced Christ and tried to restore the old pagan religion. He knew that the shallow rituals of the state religion rang hollow against the power of Christian compassion and urged his priests to try to imitate it. “These Galileans,” he complained, “are not only taking care of their own poor, but are taking care of ours!”

The Christians were not just giving handouts – they opened their homes and their hearts to those in need. They shared with them their faith in Christ as well as their Christ-centred love. They had formed a new family where everyone prayed “Our Father” and forgave others as they were forgiven themselves. They lived in and for the new Kingdom of God and many of those outsiders who received the benefit of their love came to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and became part of this loving family which brought help and shelter to others. Thus did these early Christians, filled with the love, joy, peace and kindness of the Holy Spirit, become mysteriously fruitful in their lives. Which is what Pope Francis, in His exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel),*  is encouraging us to do here and now. (EG # 280)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, our Church, in this time and this place, is certainly at a low ebb. We have conspicuously failed for decades to hand on the faith even to our own – let alone bring the Good News to those outside the Church. If our families and our parishes see more people abandoning faith in Christ than embracing it, we need to ask ourselves what is wrong? Have we lost our trust in the Holy Spirit to bring about the coming of the Kingdom? Have we stopped planting the seed of the Word of God by acts of love done in His Name and by His grace? If we see that our parishes and our Church are marked by “enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, and envy”, as St Paul warned the Galatians (see Gal 5:16-26), then perhaps we can see the problem. But if we do what Pope Francis is asking of us and put our trust in the Holy Spirit ( read Evangelii Gaudium Chapter 5, #259-283), even in these dire circumstances, we will be fruitful in the “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” which only the Holy Spirit can bring (Gal 5:22).

The Word we have heard today encourages us to have faith in God. As the Catholic biblical scholar John Bergsma writes on The Sacred Page website : “In a dark time of world history, in which Christians are suppressed, tortured, and killed in Muslim and Communist countries, and in the ‘free world’ secularists enjoy almost total control over the institutions of education and media in order to indoctrinate society with the idea that “science” has disproven God and all human ills are traceable to religion, especially Christianity and its despised morality of marriage and family—in this dark time, it’s helpful to remember that times were frequently dark in the past as well: when Ezekiel prophesied under the oppression of the Babylonian empire; when Jesus prophesied under the oppression of the Roman empire. The Messiah and all connected with Him perpetually look small and even pathetic: a mere mustard seed. Yet in ways unseen it grows. It does not die, it grows; it fills the whole earth, it brings eternal life to those that seek its shade.” ( <http://www.thesacredpage.com/2018/06/now-seeds-start-growing-readings-for-11.html> )

So brothers and sisters, with deep trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, let us keep on sowing seeds of love. Let us keep on expecting great things to happen here and now, by His amazing grace.