

11th Sunday of Year

One of the things I remember from primary school is growing seeds – I think mustard and cress was the favourite. For a child to see tiny seeds grow into plants is a wonderful thing. Later we went on to learn more about the different parts of the seed, how it contains its own start-up food supply, as well as the information that will direct the cells to grow into a plant. God's time scale is not ours. You cannot literally see a plant grow unless you watch speeded up film. The growth is real even though hidden from the human eye. We cannot speed up the process other than by providing better conditions for growing. These are simple truths of the wonderful world in which we live. We tend to take them for granted unless we are farmers or horticulturalists, and our livelihood depends on it.

Our Lord takes this simple image as a parable to talk about God's Kingdom. We have our part to play in planting the seed and caring for it, but we do not make it grow, nor can we control how quickly it grows. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why it is important for the Church not to be over-concerned with planning, although it has its place. What we must do is prepare the soil, and plant seed generously, knowing that it will not all come up. We must water the soil and weed it, but the sunshine and other factors are beyond our control. We must leave these in God's hands.

This parable holds not only for the mission of the Church in general, but also for individuals. Parents plant the seed in their children through the values they live in their home and family life, and above all by bringing their children to the Lord for baptism. On that day the Holy Spirit comes into our souls and gives us life in the Spirit. Nothing can take this gift away. Even when the parents do not come to Church or fulfil the baptismal promises in other ways, the seed is still there. The Holy Spirit bides his time until the right moment comes. Seeds can grow and flower despite lying dormant in the soil for many years. When parents fulfil their promises, watering the soil, and weeding out the temptations and dangers that could smother the good in their child, they are freeing the Holy Spirit to bear fruit more abundantly. Still, that spiritual growth is largely unseen, God's hidden work. It is only at certain moments that we become aware of how our children are growing, perhaps because they have outgrown their clothes, or we see how they respond to a new situation. With God's grace this will continue all their lives, even when they have become great trees.

First Communion is one of those moments when we see our children enter a new kind of relationship with Our Lord, and also with his Church because they can now take part fully in the Mass. The promises at baptism are beginning to flower and bear fruit, not just today, but for a lifetime. This is what the growth of the Kingdom is in real terms. It is not about numbers at Mass, but the growth of the love of God in human hearts, our love responding to his, as the growing plant responds to the light and warmth of the sun. It is something to wonder at, as we wonder at the beauty of a flower, but it is also something we must continue to nurture and encourage because the plant is still tender. As a child grows, so that responsibility becomes increasingly his or her own, but we remain a member of the family of the Church all our lives. We continue to have a responsibility to watch out for each other, and to encourage openness to the work of the Spirit, not only in adult children, but in parents too, friends and colleagues. We should never think that nothing is happening because we do not notice a change. God is doing wonderful things all around us here and now, in our parish, among our friends. May he open our eyes so that we can wonder at the hidden beauty in so many people's lives!