

The Noblest Tree in the Forest

In the name of him who taught publically in parables, but privately explained everything to his own disciples, dear friends in Christ: We all know what a parable is. It's an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Parables present spiritual truths with physical images, making their teaching points more relatable and memorable. And, as we heard, Jesus used them often. The Gospels accounts are full of his parables. Some, like those about the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are very well known and dearly loved. Others, like those in today's Gospel lesson, the parables of the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed, maybe not as much.

But Jesus wasn't doing anything new or novel by employing parables when teaching. No indeed, he was following in the long tradition of God's prophets. The Old Testament too is filled with parables – although many of them are virtually unknown to us. And it's one of these more obscure parables that we're going to look at today. It includes the passage we heard from the prophet Ezekiel in which the Lord says he's going to snap a sprig from the top of a lofty cedar, plant it on a high mountain, and cause it to grow to become the noblest of trees. And all kinds of birds will make their nests in its shade.

What's this about? To understand, we need to know that this short passage comes at the end of a much longer parable; one about two eagles and a vine. I'll give you the short version. It goes like this: a great eagle appears. Flying up, he takes a sprig from a high cedar tree and then he plants that tiny sprig in a good place for it to grow, where it's got rich soil and plenty of water. The sense is that the eagle is interested in caring for this little sprout. But instead of growing into a tree like you would expect, it becomes a creeping vine that extends its roots and branches not in the direction of the eagle that planted it, but in the direction of another great eagle that shows up on scene. It's like the vine wants to get its nourishment, its moisture, and its care from someplace else. Then the prophet asks, "Will this vine survive? Will it continue to grow?" And he answers, "No. It's going to wither up and die."

Ezekiel then gives the meaning of the parable. He explains that the sprig the eagle takes from the tree is King Zedekiah of Judah. The tree from which he's taken is the royal house of David of which King Zedekiah is a member. The first great eagle is King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He had conquered the nation of Judah and made it a vassal state of his sprawling empire. This was according to God's will. It was part of the Lord's plan to humble his proud and idolatrous people and turn them back to himself. Initially Nebuchadnezzar had placed a different descendant of David on the throne of Judah, a fellow named Jehoiachin. He turned out to be a bad choice. He was unfaithful to the Lord and disloyal to the Emperor, so Nebuchadnezzar sacked him and had him dragged off to Babylon in chains. Again, this was according to the Lord's will. Anyway, so now the Emperor had to choose another prince in David's line to rule Judah. And he thought that Zedekiah was a good candidate for the job. He was bright and capable. He had several sons to stand in his line of succession. And perhaps more importantly, he was Jehoiachin's uncle, which means that in his own generation one of his brothers had inherited the crown and it would normally pass down that line. It was highly unlikely that Zedekiah would ever rule. It made him one of those frustrated extra royals who sit near the seat of power but can never occupy it, and end up performing lesser administrative and ceremonial functions. If given the opportunity to rule, one might expect him to be grateful – a loyal lapdog to the Emperor. So Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah swear an oath of fealty to him and appointed him king of Judah in Jerusalem. That's

the great eagle planting the sprig. And there was no reason that the sprig couldn't grow into a great tree. Through Nebuchadnezzar, the Lord gave Zedekiah everything he needed to succeed – provided, of course, that he remain humble and subject to the Emperor of Babylon as God had decreed.

But Zedekiah turned out to be a creeping vine instead of a tree. Yes, to be appointed to his position as king, he swore an oath of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar which included promising to pay annual tribute as all subject nations had to do. But no sooner had he made this oath than he began scheming to break his word and get out from under his obligation to the Emperor. Because Judah itself was far too weak to break away from Babylonian domination, Zedekiah turned to the other great superpower of the day for assistance. That was Egypt. He sent emissaries to the Pharaoh with the proposal, "You send an army up here to defend me against Babylon when I rebel against the Emperor, and I'll be your vassal." Zedekiah thought he could broker a better deal with respect to tribute with the Egyptians. In the parable, this is the vine extending its roots and branches in the direction of the other great eagle. And the prophet asks, "Will this vine survive? Will it flourish?" The Lord's answer is an emphatic "No, it won't".

There are two things we want to take from this thus far. First is that the Lord is in control of world history. It is he who determines the rise and fall of nations. It is he who crowns kings and appoints rulers. And his purpose in all things is to drive events in such a way as to support his overall plan to bring salvation to his people through faith in the Savior. This is a major theme of the Old Testament, one that is reinforced time and again. And we need to emphasize it again in our day. Sometimes we who believe the Gospel sit and worry about the way things are going in the world. We see our own nation declining in global power and influence, we witness internal conflict and division, we detect the erosion of our society's moral values, the undermining of our basic institutions like marriage, the devaluation of human life, various threats to our liberties and religious freedoms and we begin to wonder if maybe God has abandoned us. The answer is no, never. To his faithful the Lord is always true. He hasn't promised that we'll always live in the lap of luxury or be citizens of the world's only superpower. He *has* promised to forgive our sins and give us eternal life through his Son Jesus Christ. That's what we need to keep our focus on whatever is happening in the world. God doesn't save nations. He uses what goes on in the nations to save people of all nations.

That's the first lesson. The second is this: through the parable the Lord was calling Zedekiah and the people of Judah to repent. He was saying, "Ah-ah, I know what you're thinking. You want to free yourself from Babylonian domination and think you can cut a sweeter deal with Egypt. You're wrong. It's not going to work. I put you under Babylon's thumb for a reason, and I mean to keep you there. I want you to repent of your idolatry and the way you've been treating each other unjustly and without compassion. I want you to turn back to me. Don't think you can thwart my will by devising a plan of your own. That is nothing more than sinful pride. I am the Lord, not you. Repent and return to me."

This is the Lord's message to his people of all ages. In our time he speaks it to those who are his in the Church of Jesus Christ. The Lord says, "You cannot save yourself. You cannot free yourself from your sinful condition. Repent of your idolatry, the things you place your trust in other than me; repent of the loveless ways you treat each other. Humble yourself, repent and return to me. And I will be your Savior. I will forgive your sin, raise you up, and crown you with life and honor."

I'd like to report that King Zedekiah and the people of Judah heeded the Lord's call to repent and that they abandoned their scheme to turn to Egypt for help; but that would be wrong.

They didn't. Oh, they got all kinds of promises from the Pharaoh. He said, "Sure, don't you worry. If you rebel against Babylon, I've got your back. I'll send an army up there in a jiffy. We'll bail you right out of trouble if it comes." So Zedekiah sealed the deal. And then he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. When it came time to send the annual tribute, he effectively said to the Emperor, "You come and take it." That was a big mistake because that's precisely what the Emperor did. In short order Jerusalem found itself besieged by a huge Babylonian army. The promised help from Egypt failed to materialize. One night, in desperation, Zedekiah abandoned his post as king and tried to escape with his family through a breach in the city wall. They were all captured. In the morning, the Babylonian general marched them up in front of the wall for all Jerusalem to see. They slaughtered Zedekiah's family, forcing him to watch; and then they gouged out his eyes so that the last thing he would see in this world was his family being killed. And then they marched him off to Babylon in chains to join his nephew, Jehoiachin. Not long afterward the whole city of Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed. The nation of Judah ceased to exist. And thus began the period known as the Babylonian Exile.

It was in anticipation of these tragic events that the Lord gave Ezekiel the little coda to the parable of the two eagles and a vine that is today's Old Testament text. The Lord says, "*I myself* will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out ... *I will* plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel *I will* plant it, that it may bear branches and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird."

And what it means is that the Lord hadn't given up on his plans. Even though by all appearances, the nation of Judah was destroyed and the line of David had been completely cut off, the Lord was moving ahead on his grand mission to bring salvation to the world through a king of the line of David. In the short term, that turned out to be a fellow named Zerubbabel, who was a grandson of Jehoiachin the first king taken away in chains. It's fitting that Zerubbabel's name means "Seed of Babel" because it was through him that the Lord replanted the tree in Israel. He was the one who led the exiles back to reestablish the nation of Judah when the Babylonian Captivity ended many years later.

In the long term, and more importantly for us, this Zerubbabel was an ancestor of Joseph, the husband of Mary, through whom Jesus inherited the right to rule over the House of David. Ultimately he is the tender twig from the tree that would grow into the noblest of cedars on the mountain heights of Israel. It's describing the Christian Church. And the wide variety of birds nesting under the tree's branches represent how people of all nations will come under Christ's shelter and how through him they will bear fruit for the Lord.

And the parable ends with these words: "I am the Lord; I bring down the high tree, and make the high tree the low tree. I dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken and I will do it."

What it means is this: the Lord humbles the proud, the high, and the mighty – those who like Zedekiah, think they can save themselves with their clever planning and their own efforts. He dries them right up. But the dry trees, those who realize that they cannot save themselves, who humble themselves under his mighty hand and turn to him in repentance – those trees he causes to flourish. He gives them life and salvation through Jesus, his Son.

And interestingly enough, he does it by drying up the greenest of trees. He humbles his own Son. He takes the noblest of trees and nails him to a cross to suffer and die for our sins. Talk about a dry tree: there's nothing drier than the dead wood on which our Savior died, nothing drier than his cracked and bleeding lips when he cried out, "I thirst". But from that dry

tree, from Jesus and his cross, comes the fruit that gives life: the Word, the Spirit, the water, the body and blood through which Christ creates and sustains us in his kingdom. And in the shadow and shelter of Jesus and his cross, the noblest tree in the forest, all people may come and live forever. The Lord has spoken. And through Jesus he did it. Thanks be to God through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!