

## **Mark 4:26-34<sup>vii viii</sup>**

Jesus also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth 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 except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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### **<sup>vii</sup> About the Gospel: Mark 4:26-34**

Although Mark puts great stress upon Jesus' teachings (1:22), he gives relatively little space to its content. But in chapter 4 he gathers some parables as examples.

The two parables of the kingdom in today's reading both concern God's presence in our world. Both emphasize the process of growth and the contrast between beginning and end. The interpretation of the parable of the seed growing secretly (found only in Mark) may center upon different elements within the parable. One is the contrast between the invisible germination of the seed with the great final harvest. The long and hidden preparation of God's work is now visible in Jesus and will lead to the harvest of the final judgment.

The parable of the mustard seed contrasts the smallness of the seed, proverbially although not literally the smallest of all, with its ability, when grown, to provide shelter. The image of "the greatest of all shrubs" is drawn from the symbol of the world-tree of life (see today's first reading).

Jesus' initial ministry will lead to the inclusion of all nations. The contrast between small and secret beginnings and unexpected and triumphant endings in both parables also applies both to Jesus' own earthly career and to the growth of the Church. Finally, the point is made that only faith in Christ makes possible genuine insight into the nature of the kingdom.

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## viii **Reflection and Response**

Today's readings are colored by lovely shades of green, and are filled with images of growth. From the cedars of Ezekiel to the palm tree of the psalm, the flourishing of human beings is part of all creation's fruitfulness.

In Jesus' parable of the kingdom, seed (God's word) is scattered broadly. Perhaps as he told this story, Jesus was watching a farmer hand-sow a field. The farmer does not know how the seed sprouts and grows. The process goes on while the farmer sleeps and wakes, not by any effort on the farmer's part, but by the mystery of growth itself. "The earth produces of itself" and the harvest comes. Jesus is not trying to explain the mystery of growth. He is commanding the same kind of trust in the reality of God's kingdom that we depend upon in the natural world. Just as we believe a seed is growing in the dark ground while we cannot see it, so we believe the kingdom is growing in our dark world.

For the spiritually perceptive, Jesus himself is the seed God has sown in the world. We believe in the divine kingdom already "planted" in Christ and trust the creative Spirit of God to bring forth the new harvest of redeemed human souls.

The word "harvest" is also used as a biblical note of warning. The sickle is judgment. The grain was ripe when Jesus came into the world. But now the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. God's kingdom has already sprung up in Christ, and we must decide whether or not to be among the disciples who understand his words and live by them.