

Next to Last Sunday after Pentecost
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
19 November 2017

“I will open my mouth in parables; things hidden since the world was made I will announce.” Mt. 13:35

The Gospel parables of *The Mustard Seed* and *The Leaven* (Mt. 13:31-35) tell of the growth of holiness in the Church, the Kingdom of God. In today’s Epistle, *the First Epistle to the Thessalonians (1:2-10)*, St. Paul in his praise of the faith of the Thessalonians shows how quickly the Gospel parables were fulfilled in the early Church: *“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great tribulation with joy in the Holy Spirit, so that you became a pattern for all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.* I Thess. 1:6-7 In the *Gospel* (Mt.13:31-35), Jesus speaks of *The Parable of the Mustard Seed* which *“is the smallest of all the seeds; but when it grows up it is larger than any herb and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and dwell in its branches.”* Mt. 13:32. Jesus also speaks of *The Parable of the Leaven* *“which a woman took and buried in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”* Mt. 13:33. Both parables speak of the Kingdom of God, the Church upon earth, and how it will grow from the Twelve Apostles throughout the whole world and will influence all peoples with the gospel message. This fruitful growth of the Church among the pagan people through the preaching of St. Paul is seen in the *Epistle to the Thessalonians*. The Thessalonians became an example to all the other Churches in Greece for their faithfulness, sacrifice and good example: *“We thank God always for all of you when we make mention of you in our prayers for we unceasingly remember your active faith, your energetic charity and your unwavering hope in our Lord Jesus Christ before the face of God, our Father.”* I Thess. 1:2-3.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Although it is the smallest of seeds, the mustard seed will grow into a tree so that the birds of the air dwell in its branches. So, too, the Church Jesus founded upon the Twelve Apostles would grow until it encompassed almost all of the known world at that time. Similarly, within three centuries the Church would be established throughout the entire Roman Empire. St. Augustine comments on the spiritual significance of the mustard seed: *“At first glance it seems small, worthless, despised, not marked by any flavour, not surrounded by any odour, nor giving any sign of sweetness; but*

*once it is bruised, it sheds abroad its odour, displays its sharpness and exhales nourishment of a fiery taste. ...Thus, too, the Christian Faith, at first sight, appears small, worthless and frail, not manifesting its power, nor carrying any semblance of pride, nor conferring grace. But as soon as it begins to be bruised by divers temptations, immediately it manifests its vigour, indicates its sharpness, breathes the warmth of belief in the Lord, and is possessed with so great ardour of divine fire, that both itself is hot and it compels those who participate to be fervent also. As the two disciples said in the holy gospel, when the Lord spoke with them after His passion, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us by the way, while the Lord Jesus opened to us the Scriptures?’ (Lk. 24:32) A grain of mustard, then, warms the inward members of our bodies, but the power of faith burns up the sins of our hearts. The one indeed takes away piercing cold; the other expels the devil’s frost of transgressions. A grain of mustard, I say, purges away corporeal humours, but faith puts an end to the flux of lusts. By the one, medicine is gained for the head; but by faith our spiritual Head, Christ the Lord, is often refreshed. Moreover, we enjoy the sacred odour of faith, according to the analogy of mustard seed, as the blessed Apostle saith, ‘We are a sweet savour of Christ unto God.’” (II Cor. 2:15) A Lapide, *Commentary on St. Matthew’s Gospel*, p. 27*

The Parable of the Leaven

The Parable of the Leaven flows naturally from *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*. As the Church grows, so will it influence the whole world just as the leaven (yeast) permeates all the dough. Interestingly, the three measures of bread is quite large and will feed eighteen people for five days. Jesus makes it so large to emphasize that the Church will influence the whole world. St. Ambrose also applies this to Christ in a spiritual meaning of the leaven: *“Therefore, if the Lord is wheat (as He Himself says in John 12:24), the Lord is the leaven, too, since leaven is usually made only of wheaten flour. Therefore, the Lord is rightly compared to leaven for when He was in the form of man, made small by humility and despised for His weakness, He contained within Himself such power of wisdom that the world itself could scarcely contain His doctrine. When He began to diffuse Himself throughout the world by virtue of His divinity, He immediately drew the entire human race into His substance*

by His power so that He might place the yoke of His Holy Spirit upon all of them, that is, make all Christians to be what Christ is....so Christ (like leaven) is broken up and dissolved by His various sufferings, and His moisture, that is, His precious blood, was poured out for our salvation, that it might by mingling itself with the whole human race, consolidate that race, which lay scattered abroad.” A Lapide, p. 29-30

The Growth of the Church at Thessalonica

After St. Paul was expelled by the Jewish leaders at Philippi, he went to the port city of Thessalonica where he found the inhabitants of that city open to the message of the gospel. At first, St. Paul went to the Jewish residents of the city, but after a few weeks with some success with the Jews, he turned to the Gentiles. He met with so much success that the Jewish leaders brought charges of treason (preaching about another king) against the Christian missionaries, and St. Paul and his companions had to flee. While at Athens, St. Paul sent Timothy to see how the Church at Thessalonica was doing during the persecution. Timothy reported later, when Paul was at Corinth, that the converts were heroic in the practice of the faith: *“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great tribulation with joy in the Holy Spirit, so that you became a pattern for all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. From you the word of the Lord has been spread abroad not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we need say nothing further.”* I Thess. 1:6-8. The Thessalonians are a joy to the heart of Paul, as they not only embraced the faith from their pagan ways, but they have even imitated Paul and his companions, Silvanus and Timothy, and spread the faith by their good example throughout the land and the other seaports.

Early Christians a reproach to us today

Dom Gueranger in his book, *The Liturgical Life, Vol. 4*, tells us how the early Christians are strong reproach to us to imitate them in their lives: *“The praise which the apostle here gives to the Thessalonians for their fervour in the faith they had embraced, conveys a reproach to the Christians of our times. These neophytes of Thessalonica, who, a short time before, were worshippers of idols, had become so earnest in the practice of the Christian religion, that even the apostle is filled with admiration. We are the descendants of the countless Christian ancestors;*

we received our regeneration by Baptism at our first coming into the world; we were taught the doctrine of Jesus Christ from our earliest childhood: yet, our faith is not so strong, nor our lives so holy, as were those of the early Christian. Their main occupation was serving the living and true God, and waiting for the coming of their Saviour. Our hope is precisely the same as that which made their hearts so fervent; how comes it that our faith is not like theirs in its generosity? We love this present life, as though we had not firm conviction that it is to pass away.” Gueranger, p. 102

Good Example

The power of good example is the reason why the Thessalonians followed Paul and his companions and why other Greeks followed the example of the Thessalonians. Despite persecution, they kept the faith and awaited the coming of the Lord. So, too, should we, as the parables in today’s gospel suggest, try to build up the kingdom of God by our good example and permeate all of society. This is what Our Lady requested at Fatima when she asked us to pray and sacrifice for the souls of so many in our time who are in danger of being lost for all eternity unless they get a miracle of God’s grace: *“Pray and sacrifice for many souls will go to hell, unless someone prays and sacrifices for them.”* (Fatima, 1917)

“Could you not, then, watch one hour with Me?” Mt. 26:40

In his address for General Audience on 17 November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI made the following comments about Eucharistic devotion: *“Dear friends, fidelity to the encounter with the Eucharistic Christ in Sunday’s Holy Mass is essential for the journey of faith, but let us try as well to frequently go to visit the Lord present in the Tabernacle! Gazing in adoration at the consecrated Host, we discover the gift of the love of God, we discover the Passion and the cross of Jesus, and also His Resurrection. Precisely through our gazing in adoration, the Lord draws us to Himself, into His mystery, to transform us as He transforms the bread and wine. The saints always found strength, consolation and joy in the Eucharistic encounter. With the words of the Eucharistic hymn, ‘Adoro te devote,’ let us repeat before the Lord, present in the Most Blessed Sacrament: ‘Make me believe ever more in You, that in You I may have hope, that I may love You!’ Thank you.”* Pope Benedict XVI