ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME  

Ex 17:22-24; 2Cor 5:6-10 Mk 4:26-34

Last week Pope Francis traveled to Sarajevo on a mission of peace. The visit was on June 6th, the anniversary of my ordination to priesthood, and the coincidence left much food for thought. When we hear Sarajevo, our first thought might be of Olympic Games, but it is also the place challenged by centuries of horrific violence and almost diabolic ferocity, and the pope’s mission of peace had tremendous significance.

In the early 1990’s, prior to the recent war, a visit to the shrine at Medjugorie brought me to the same area, leaving a profound impression. Returning from the shrine to our flight home, our bus was passing through mountains that became the site of fierce fighting in the war which was to wrack the area a few years later. One of my fellow pilgrims became extremely agitated, and fearfully expressed her sense of diabolical evil all around us. Our guide had referred to the fact that the history of this area was filled with instances of unspeakable horror. As I attempted to assure the person of our safety, all the passengers joined in prayers for peace – the prayers were answered.

Pope Francis referred to his visit as “a sign of peace” and commended the ongoing efforts of the European Union to bring peace to this land still so much in need of God’s peace. On this weekend of Ordinary Time, we are called to remember God’s call to all of us to discover and live the peace He promises. He speaks to the people of the Exodus and reminds the world that He “will make the withered tree bloom”.

In the gospel today Jesus preached the reality of the Kingdom of God, the reality of us humans living in the presence of the God of peace. He describes this kingdom in the figure of the seed sown by the farmer who “knows not how that seed will sprout and grow”. In the reality of divine love, we, like the seed, will grow to maturity when God brings us to a peaceful harvest in ways we know not.

Jesus’ reference also to the figure of the mustard seed, “smallest of all the seeds on the earth”, should catch our attention as He reminds us that “the seed becomes the largest of plants where the birds of the sky can live in its branches.” If we try to predict the growth of the Church, the Kingdom of God, we can become frustrated and wrong. Why do we forget the parable when we are called to live the life of the kingdom of God in the great gift of Christ’s Church?

When the people of Sarajevo had forgotten that gift, they became victims of a violence that gave the world, among other things, the horror of World War I (Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo) and the recent Bosnian War – a war whose consequences still call
for the presence of American personnel, but a war we tend to forget. Pope Francis’ visit is a reminder of peace, and today’s liturgy is a reminder of the Kingdom we are called to live in peace during our own days.

As we live the Kingdom of God here and now, we are enabled to bring peace and to counter evil in whatever form or at whatever time it plagues our world. That kingdom grows in spite of our awareness, and it has the capacity to sustain human life far beyond the limits of our imagination. It is our task to bring the seed of the Church’s reality in the Kingdom of God to the streets of our cities and the lives of all peoples. We are not called simply to deplore violence in our world – or worse, to ignore it. We are called to allow the seed to grow within us, to shape our attitude toward one another and to make real the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Francis’ example enables us to conquer our own fears and to focus our attention on the reality of our relationship with Almighty God and with one another. It is the fulfillment of the basic commandments of love. May we bring the mustard seed to Bosnia, Aleppo, the streets of Philadelphia and Baltimore. Without our knowing how, may the seed of God’s Kingdom grow in our hearts, in our families, parishes, towns and cities.

There is new meaning to the phrase: “we do not have here a lasting city.” The Kingdom of God spans time and eternity. The mustard seed’s growth reaches maturity only in the wonder of heaven. We must show the world the beauty of trust so that we can all discover the growth that can provide shade for all humankind.