

*Thus says the Lord God:*

*I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar,  
 from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot,  
 and plant it on a high and lofty mountain;  
 on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.  
 It shall put forth branches and bear fruit,  
 and become a majestic cedar.  
 Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it,  
 every winged thing in the shade of its boughs.  
 And all the trees of the field shall know  
 that I, the Lord,  
 bring low the high tree,  
 lift high the lowly tree,  
 wither up the green tree,  
 and make the withered tree bloom.  
 As I, the Lord, have spoken, so will I do.*

*Ezekiel 17:22-24*

*See also 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 and Mark 4:26-34*

I wonder – because I often wonder about off-the-wall things – I wonder what impression the first reading would make if it was the only part of the whole Bible known to some group of people. What would they think of the faith that spawned it?

I admit, it would take some very knowledgeable people. They'd have to know the background of the piece, they'd have to understand the poetic images, and know some Israelite history.

Well, we know those things, or at least we could look them up. We know Ezekiel wrote this when he, and thousands of other Jews, were exiled to Babylon, dragged from their homeland to serve a foreign people. Babylon was the superpower of the day, and, as Ezekiel said elsewhere, it's subjection of Israel had only just begun.

Yet this prophecy is a message of hope. From the topmost branches of a cedar God would plant in Israel a tender shoot—small, fragile—yet destined to grow into a majestic tree with birds nesting peacefully and happily in its branches. It's an early prophecy of the Messiah: coming from the line of David, represented by the cedar, to restore Israel to greatness. “And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, bring low the high tree (i.e. Babylon), lift high the lowly tree (i.e. Israel).” Hope, even in the midst of devastation, that's the message, that's what those people I imagined might come to know of us: we are a people of hope, even when the odds against us seem extreme.

Jesus' parables of the Kingdom proclaim the same message. The Kingdom is a mustard seed, promising life and joy and peace, but now it looks like a tiny pebble, lost among other pebbles, seeming powerless, ineffective. Yet, still, it will grow, it will do what it was meant to do.

That's the situation the Church is in, now much more than when I was growing up. It seems powerless and ineffective in a culture that no longer values and fosters religious faith, that no longer has any real moral grounding. But our culture is founded on religious faith

and religious faith is something human beings need to become what we were meant to be! Our culture is removing the very things it needs to live. I fear our culture is self-destructing.

You see, without believing in anything above us, without principles that come not from us but from a power beyond, anything goes. That, I think, is what's behind people's conviction that human beings are the ones to decide matters of life and death: like contraception, abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, the death penalty. Now people think human beings are the ones to define what marriage is, and even what it means to be male or female!

In none of this do I mean to disrespect anyone, especially not those whose pain and suffering have led our culture, trying to be compassionate, to respond in inappropriate ways. I certainly don't condone the rejection, sometimes violent rejection, people have experienced when, say, they have found themselves with an unwanted pregnancy or a debilitating illness or a same-sex attraction.

I'm not making mere political statements. I hate that these issues have been reduced to politics. And I'm not talking about "traditional values." That's the point, politics are for things that human beings get to decide and these things are not a matter of changeable human traditions.

I'm talking about principles, I'm talking about what's true, I'm talking about what's real. When we get away from what's true and what's real we move into Fantasyland, which might be pleasant for a while, but can't sustain us,

and ultimately harms us. I'm saying that some of the solutions being proposed to keep people from suffering ultimately bring harm!

Consider this analogy: I'm older than I once was. I've noticed that gravity has an unpleasant effect on my joints, giving me aches and pains I didn't used to have. But I also know Physics, I know that when you're falling you don't feel the effects of gravity. Everything falls together at the same rate so the top things don't press down on the bottom things. So, perhaps I should solve the problem of the aches and pains I feel from gravity by jumping off a very tall building! I wouldn't feel any aches or pains all the way down!

That's not a good solution! But it's the kind of solution our culture proposes for certain problems, solutions that ignore the nature of things.

And that's what the Church is up against. People of faith seem so small, so fragile, so powerless and ineffective in the face of all this. Individually and collectively we can feel lost, alone, our voices helpless amidst the constant babble of a thousand other voices speaking more loudly a different message than ours.

It's so important for the Catholic Church to be a beacon of hope and truth in an increasingly confused world. It's important – especially in this age that gives us little or no support for doing so – to keep the faith, to live as we should live, according to laws and principles that are beyond human power to establish.

That's the context in which St. Paul was speaking when he said "We'd rather leave the body and go home to the Lord." He wasn't suicidal, he was explaining the courage we Christians need – to walk by faith, not by sight.

Yes, we'd rather be home with the Lord, but the Lord needs us here, doing what we can do, living as we should live. For we ARE that farmer in Jesus' parable, scattering the seed. We don't know how it grows, but the one who DOES know wants us to help him turn barren fields into lush gardens.

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