

Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati always carried around a copy of Saint Paul's letters. If someone asked what was in the book he was reading, he'd reply, "The words of eternal life." He'd often encourage his friends to read St Paul, telling them that Paul was the model of Christian living. What we see in Paul's letters is a practical application of the words and life of Jesus. The problem with Paul is that he would have been a grammar teacher's worst nightmare. That, plus the fact that there is no punctuation in the earliest written scriptures, makes understanding Paul a bit of a challenge. I'll talk more about today's second reading in a couple of minutes but first a few words about Ezekiel and the gospel; both of these readings are speaking about the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Ezekiel was active in the years of the Babylonian Empire during which Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed and its people sent into exile. Today's reading is a follow up to a parable in which Ezekiel warns of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. What we heard today is God's promise to restore the Davidic kingdom through a messiah. The symbolism is interesting. In the Old Testament, trees were often used as symbols for nations; in this case the cedar represents ancient Israel. You have probably heard of the Cedars of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani* is its scientific name)--that's almost certainly what kind of cedar this is, or its a closely related species. Lebanon, by the way, refers to the mountain range on the northern border of Israel and it probably would have been part of the original Davidic kingdom. An interesting thing about the cedar of Lebanon is that it cannot grow from a cutting. If we were to take a fresh shoot from the top of the tree as Ezekiel describes, the shoot would die. But nothing is impossible for God. Ezekiel tells us that God himself will plant this shoot on the mountain heights of Israel. For a faithful Jew, what is the highest point in the world? Jerusalem. If a Jew was at the North Pole or standing on top of Mount Everest and was planning a trip to Jerusalem, he or she would still say, "I am going up to Jerusalem." And then there are the birds. These represent the nations of the world, and in fact, all of creation. All of these will come to rest in the shade of this majestic cedar which shouldn't be able to grow, but does, on the heights of Israel. Can anyone think of a tree or something wooden that is associated with death...being planted in the ground on a hill...in Jerusalem...that actually ends up giving life and drawing all things to itself? It's on the wall behind me. Do you know what type of wood is found in many of the relics of the True Cross? Cedar. In this passage, God is speaking through Ezekiel not only to promise the re-establishment of the Davidic

kingdom, but he is also promising to establish the kingdom of heaven through the death and resurrection of his beloved son who died on the wood of the cross on top of Mount Calvary in Jerusalem.

As I said, only God can cut a shoot from a cedar of Lebanon and make it grow. We see a similar theme in the first part of the gospel. The farmer plants the seeds but it is God who makes the plants grow. They grow unseen in the darkness of night while the farmer sleeps. This can be an encouraging thought for us when we don't see the fruits of our labors. The good works we do are like the scattering of seeds. God will make them bear fruit, but he always does it in his own way and time. Much of what we experience in our lives is the fruit of seeds scattered by the generations who came before us and many of the seeds we are scattering today won't bear fruit until after we are long gone.

The second part of the parable ties in nicely with something Paul wrote in his letter: "We walk by faith, not by sight." We should not judge something based on its external appearance. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a seed so small and insignificant that it usually goes unnoticed, yet once it is sown in good soil, it will become a large bush and many birds will rest in its shade. Just like in Ezekiel, the birds represent the nations of the world which will be incorporated into the kingdom of God.

When Paul tells us, we walk by faith, not by sight, he is telling us that we cannot judge based on external appearances. By human standards, God often chooses to act in ways that make absolutely no sense. He regularly chooses the lowliest of his creatures to his work. Even the way he chose to rescue us is totally contrary to human logic. Who in their right mind would choose to rescue his people by coming as a baby born in a manger? Absolutely ridiculous in the eyes of the world...but it makes perfect sense in the logic of God.

The greek word that Paul used for "walk" carries with it a sense of going on pilgrimage and in the context of the letter, this makes sense. Just like the Corinthians and everyone else who has ever walked the face of the earth, our lives are a pilgrimage. We are journeying to become ever more closely united with God. Paul's words: "While we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord" doesn't mean that God is absent. God is never absent. Paul means that we are not yet united with God in the way he intends. Walking in faith, not being distracted by the deceptions of a world captured by the enemy, will get us where God wants us

to go. A journey of this type requires great courage because the devil will throw everything he can at us to lead us astray.

Walk by faith, not by sight. Those words are important for one other reason. Pilgrims need food. And Jesus gave us the food we need, the only food that will give us eternal life. The Eucharist. The world may only see a thin round wafer and a cup of wine, but our faith tells us that hidden under that disguise is the true bread from heaven: the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus.

Let us prepare to receive our Lord in the Eucharist so that we courageously march forth and let God work through us to establish his heavenly kingdom on earth.