

Friday in the Fourth Week after the Epiphany: Mass January 29, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 1, Epiphany 3: Hebrews 10:32–39; Psalm 37:1–7; Mark 4:26–34

I have a clear memory of sitting on the floor by myself and watching television as Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald. This morning, I learned from the internet that it was a Sunday, November 24, 1963, two days after President Kennedy’s assassination. It was 11:21 AM in Dallas, 12:21 PM in Virginia Beach. I was three months from being ten-years-old. We would have just gotten home from church. I probably had had enough time to get out of the sport coat, shirt, and tie that was customary in those days. I know my grandparents’ house had a JFK picture, as did, I think, all my New Hampshire relatives’ homes did. I wonder how Kennedy’s assassinations, and those of King and Kennedy when I was 14, still shape some of my emotional responses.

Perhaps ten years ago now, I watched a presidential motorcade move through Central Park. There were motorcycles, many vehicles, two identical presidential limousines, more vehicles, and then, just before the last squad of motorcycles, there were two ambulances. I can’t imagine anyone wanting his or her spouse to have a position that required two ambulances wherever the spouse went.

I found myself thinking about Kennedy today because of the words of his inaugural address. The most famous line was probably, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” But the continuation from yesterday of Mark’s fourth chapter, his chapter of parables, made me think of his conclusion, “Let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking [God’s] blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”¹

¹ <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/inaugural-address-19610120>, (accessed 29 January 2021).

Today's gospel lesson are the concluding parables in this chapter, two more seed parables, first, the "Seed Growing by Itself . . . and the Mustard Seed."² The nature of God's dominion is an important theme for Mark. Its course through history is God's work. In the first parable that we heard, the farmer is simply the sower; he gets no credit in the parable for everything that goes into planting and growing. But in the first parable in this chapter, the Parable of the Sower, Jesus explained to his disciples that the sower sowed the word.³ Professor Marcus suggests that we might think of this being the Almighty planting a new Eden.⁴ Marcus also notes that this gospel was shaped by the events before, during, and after the Great Jewish Revolt that started in the year 66 and concluded after Jerusalem's destruction in the year 70⁵ and finally, the fall of the fortress at Masada in early 74.⁶

Let me say something about the last verse of this parable. We heard, "But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."⁷ This translation is not inaccurate, but elsewhere in this gospel, the verb here is translated as "handed over" or "betrayed" when John⁸ and Jesus⁹ were arrested. The harvesting of the fruit is a reference to the end of time.

Now about the Mustard Seed. Searle writes, "These passages draw on the widespread ancient Near Eastern image of the 'cosmic tree' to describe a worldwide empire."¹⁰ I sometimes these words of John's Jesus had found their way into all of the gospels, "And I have other sheep, that are not of

² Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 325.

³ Mark 1:14.

⁴ Marcus, 328.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_War, (accessed 29 January 2021).

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Masada, (accessed 29 January 2021).

⁷ Mark 4:29.

⁸ Mark 1:14.

⁹ Mark 14:10–11, 18, 21, 41–42, 44.

¹⁰ Searle, 331.

this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”¹¹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2021 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

¹¹ John 10:16.