

Homily for 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time

You've got to be kidding me!

The singular holiness of Catherine Benincasa (1347–1380) manifested itself in her early childhood. The six-year-old Catherine first encountered Jesus Christ while on an errand with her brother, Stefano, when Jesus appeared to her above the Church of Saint Dominic accompanied by saints Peter, Paul, and John the Evangelist. Jesus was seated on a throne, dressed in priestly garments, and wearing a pope's crown. He said nothing to the little girl but simply gave her a blessing. However, in that encounter, Jesus captured her heart and her imagination.¹

At 19 St Catherine began an active ministry to the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned of Siena. When a wave of the plague (black death) struck her hometown in 1374, (she was 27) most people fled, but she and her followers stayed to nurse the ill and bury the dead. She was said to be tireless by day and night, healing all of whom the physicians despaired; some even claimed she raised the dead.

When the crisis abated, she embarked on a letter-writing ministry to convert sinners and reform the church and society. Like many reformers of the day, she was disturbed by the rampant corruption of the church, and she believed the source of the problem was the so-called Babylonian Captivity. Because of early fourteenth-century political intrigue, the papacy had moved to Avignon, France in 1309. This scandalized people for two reasons: first, the papacy was divorced from the special sanctity of Rome. Second, the popes became increasingly captive to French politics and lifestyle, which were decadent and corrupt. In a series of letters, Catherine exhorted the Pope Gregory XI to address the problems of the church and charged him to return to Rome:

"Respond to the Holy Spirit who is calling you! I tell you: Come! Come! Come! Don't wait for time because time isn't waiting for you."

He returned to Rome in December 1376 – 67 years after the Popes had moved to Avignon. But then in March 1378 he died. Gregory was succeeded by Urban VI. Immediately, the French cardinals elected a second pope, Clement VII. Despite the heroic efforts of Saint Catherine to mediate what was now the Western Schism, it continued through intrigue and war until 1409, when a united council deposed the reigning popes and elected Alexander V. Catherine died as the schism was intensifying, on April 29th 1380, at the age of 33.

I have started my homily with this story of St. Catherine because although she experienced such great trials during her life, she never questioned the authenticity of the Church as the mystical body of Christ and the Pope as His Vicar on Earth. Her vision at the age of six of Jesus wearing the Pope's crown inspired her to honour the office of the papacy while willing to speak boldly to Popes Gregory and Urban. However, if seen from a purely worldly perspective a person could

¹ Hill, M. L. (2011). [Foreword](#). In M. L. Hill (Ed.), *Path of Holiness: Wisdom from Catherine of Siena* (p. xvii). Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media.

conclude her life ended in failure because the Schism of the Western Church would last for another 29 years she died. However, this woman who died at the same age of Jesus, another person whose mission seemingly ended in defeat, was declared by St Pope Paul VI a Doctor of the Church in 1970, a title bestowed on only 35 other people in the history of the Church.

So, what is it that so inspired this courageous and tenacious saint? She took with utmost trust and seriousness the teaching of Jesus of which today's parables speak with an immediacy to what shaped her perspective.

As I have said before, the parables of Jesus are riddles and with all riddles there is a twist, something unexpected. When the first hearers listened to today's parables, their response would have been:

“You’ve got to be kidding me! The kingdom of heaven is like what?”

So, what is the twist in the parable of the mustard seed? Well it is this, the mustard bush is actually considered an overgrown weed. No one would grow an orchard of mustard trees in the Fertile Crescent. Now what is Jesus getting across here? Two things, I think. The first is that his kingdom is like a mustard seed, it will start off small, but it is invasive. It will grow and extend its influence far beyond where the original seeds were sown. The second point Jesus is making is the kingdom of heaven when it comes to earth will not look very majestic and convincing. In the Old Testament Ezekiel, the prophet speaks of God's kingdom this way:

***On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live.
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.²***

Now that's more like it, a noble cedar – but no says Jesus, not a cedar but a mustard tree. Such is the kingdom of God in this world, such was the Church in St Catherine's day and the Church in our day – people can miss it or say what's so good about that, not too impressive is it?

What about the leaven mixed with the flour. Now for the Jewish people leaven was representative of evil, and sin. So why would Jesus say the Kingdom of heaven is like leaven mixed with three measures of flour – which by the way is 22.6796 Kilos, or 50 pounds. What does this mean Jesus? You've got to be kidding me, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven mixed with 3 measures of flour. The leaven of the Cross – the greatest evil act ever committed because with it, humans killed God, is the leaven that will be used to bring about the greatest good, our redemption, that will like leaven spread throughout the world. There is a way God uses suffering to achieve his purposes, something that St. Catherine knew well, and St. Paul in today's reading

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Eze 17:23). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

where he speaks of the Holy Spirit groaning with our Spirit as we deal with the leaven of our present lives.

Then there is the wheat and the tares, as it is popularly known. This parable was at the heart of St Catherine's understanding of life. She truly believed what Jesus said, that there are children of the kingdom and of the evil one, and there will be a judgment. Because of this she tirelessly worked to bring people to Jesus so that in the words we heard of Wisdom chapter 12:

***18 You who are sovereign in strength judge with mildness,
and with great forbearance you govern us;
for you have power to act whenever you choose.***

***19 Through such works you have taught your people
that the righteous man must be kind,
and you have filled your sons with good hope,³***

This was the message St Catherine proclaimed from adolescence; that the righteous man must be kind and be filled with good hope. Such kindness and hope increase within those who see that in this world the Kingdom of heaven is like the weeds sown among the wheat, a mustard tree and leaven mixed with 50 pounds of flour. s Jesus says at the conclusion of today's reading:

“Those who have ears let them hear”

St Catherine was one good listener whose trust in Jesus allowed her to undoubtedly say: “You’ve got to be kidding me”, because of how she saw the Kingdom of Heaven present in her day. But who famously said:

“Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”

³ [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Wis 12:18–19). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.