

Historic Commentary



(Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 4:26-34 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 4](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Ambrose](#): While you are asleep, O man, and without your being aware of it, the earth of itself is producing its fruits.

[Tertullian](#): Observe how the created order has advanced little by little toward fruitfulness. First comes the grain, and from the grain arises the shoot, and from the shoot emerges the shrub. From there the boughs and leaves gather strength, and the whole that we call a tree expands. Then follows the swelling of the germen, and from the germen bursts the flower, and from the flower the fruit opens. The fruit itself, primitive for a while, and unshapely, keeping the straight course of its development, is matured, little by little, to the full mellowness of its flavor. In just this way has righteousness grown in history. The proximate righteousness found in the created order is grounded in the holy God whose righteousness first emerged in a rudimentary stage as an undeveloped natural apprehension in the presence of the holy One. Then it advanced through the law and prophets to childhood. At long last through the gospel, God's righteousness has been personally manifested with the vital energies of youth. Now through the paraclete, righteousness is being manifested in its mature stage.

[Gregory the Great](#): To produce "the blade" is to hold the first tender beginning of good. The "blade" arrives at maturity when virtue conceived in the mind leads to advancement in good works. The "full corn" fructifies in "the ear" when virtue makes such great progress that it comes into its fullest possible expression.

[Clement of Alexandria](#): The word which proclaims the kingdom of heaven is sharp and pungent as mustard. It represses bile (anger) and checks inflammation (pride). From this word flows the soul's true vitality and fitness for eternity. To such increased size did the growth of the word come that the tree which sprang from it (that is the Church of Christ now being established over the whole earth) filled the world, so that the birds of the air (that is, holy angels and lofty souls) dwelt in its branches.

Ambrose: Its seed is indeed very plain, and of little value; but if bruised or crushed it shows forth its power. So faith first seems a simple thing; but if it is bruised by its enemies it gives forth proof of its power, so as to fill others who hear or read of it with the odor of its sweetness. Our martyrs, Felix, Nabor and Victor, possessed the sweet odor of faith; but they dwelt in obscurity. When the persecution came, they laid down their arms, and bowed their necks, and being stricken by the sword they diffused to all the ends of the earth the grace of their martyrdom.... The Lord himself is the grain of mustard seed. He was without injury; but the people were unaware of him as a grain of mustard seed of which they took no notice. He chose to be bruised, that we might say: "For we are the good odor of Christ unto God."

Augustine: In the same manner, then, the catholicity of our mother becomes palpable when others who are not her sons make war on her. It is a fact that this little branch of worshipers in Africa has been broken off from the great tree which embraces the whole world in the spreading of its branches. She is in labor with them in charity, that they may return to the root without which they cannot have true life.

Tertullian: Christ Jesus our Lord clearly declared himself as to who he was while he lived on earth.... Who then of sound mind can possibly suppose that those whom the Lord ordained to be leaders and teachers were ignorant of anything essential to salvation? Who could suppose that he who kept them, as he did, so close to himself in their daily attentiveness, in their discipline, in their companionship, to whom, when they were alone, he used to expound all things which were obscure, telling them that "to them it was given to know those mysteries," which it was not permitted the people to understand—now would he leave them ignorant?

John Calvin: Mark 4:26. So is the kingdom of God. Though this comparison has the same object with the two immediately preceding, yet Christ appears to direct his discourse purposely to the ministers of the word, that they may not grow indifferent about the discharge of their duty, because the fruit of their labor does not immediately appear. He holds out for their imitation the example of husbandmen, who throw seed into the ground with the expectation of reaping, and do not torment themselves with uneasiness and anxiety, but go to bed and rise again; or, in other words, pursue their ordinary and daily toil, till the corn arrive at maturity in due season. In like manner, though the seed of the word be concealed and choked for a time, Christ enjoins pious teachers to be of good courage, and not to allow their alacrity to be slackened through distrust.