

## **Fifteenth Sunday of the Year July 16, 2017**

Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

God reveals to us and communicates with us continuously through persons, works and situations. The word of God comes gently and is never intended to remain suspended like clouds in midair, but to soak the earth and to be drawn back toward God after completing its purpose. The Word of God is eternal Word without beginning or end. Today the Word of God is compared to seed that sprouts and brings forth new life. All of our life, entire creation is groaning in anticipation of being all we can become. God's spirit is infused within human beings where it brings forth divine fruits. The farmer is aware that he has to prepare the ground, weed it and water it to produce good fruit. We are invited to sow the seed of the Gospel with our lives. In the Gospel of today we have the parable of the sower. The farmer goes out to sow the seed and it is placed in varying types of soil. A person who hears the word of God and understands it reaps a rich and fruitful harvest. In the first reading Prophet Isaiah speaks of the power of the word of God. It is like the rain that comes to the earth to make it fertile and fruitful by germinating the seed for the sower and bread for the ones who eat, so also the word of God is meant to bear plentiful fruit in men's heart. It brings life and joy where there was only death and sorrow. In the second reading Paul refers to the fact that all humans and all creation suffer because of sin and he assures us that the present sufferings are nothing compared to future glory. Material creation though subject to corruption, will eventually share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

In the first reading of today, Prophet Isaiah brings a message of consolation to the people of Israel in exile as he urges them to be hopeful of future glory. He gives them a powerful message drawn from the natural world. Everyone in the Prophet's audience would have appreciated the transforming power of water and the cycle of life it made possible. He makes rain a symbol for the powerful word of God. Rain comes down from above and makes the earth fruitful; the earth produces a good harvest and also prepares the seed for future use; just so God's word rains down and enriches the world. The world like parched earth is waiting for the rain of God's word. The word of God has the same dramatic influence on the spiritual landscape. Their lives in exile were deprived of life and hope. All of that will change if they allow the word of God into their hearts. The prophet is

confident that God's word will find fertile ground in the hearts of the people and transform them into a people equipped to nourish the nations of the world spiritually. Even if they do not repent, God will still take the initiative for life. His divine word will not return to heaven without achieving the life-giving purpose. The prophet places before them the message of hope that after all God is alive and well and no matter what the difficulties of any time or place, the facts of God's plan for the world in the final analysis are friendly.

In the second reading Paul reminds us that there is a much wider vision of life and in the world, than comprehended at first sight. Paul sees all of creation as joined to humankind in being wounded by sin and in its present memory. Human creation and non-human creation are tied together in a tragic but hopeful future. The whole creation, the physical world, the angels of God, the heavenly saints and all those who walk in the living faith, they await the glory of God that is to come, the days when the children of God shall inherit the eternal Kingdom. Creation as we see it today, decaying in all things, comes nowhere near reflecting the future glory that God has planned for those He loves, those who have answered His call to embrace righteousness. Those whose eyes are opened and whose ears are able to hear the Word of God, they know the way, the truth and the life that leads to the Kingdom of God. They know that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is about to be revealed. They know that God makes good things come out of everything. They know that, the present sufferings that must be endured in perseverance, serve the purpose of sanctifying the soul as all are destined for glory. In all things, they see the hand of God at work as a loving Father who disciplines His children so they may become holy children, so they may become the first fruits of the Spirit. In faith, those who have answered God's personal call, they groan inwardly while they wait for the day of adoption when the redemption of the bodies shall take place, when at the twinkle of an eye, all shall be transformed, receiving incorruptible bodies in the glory of Christ.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the sower and the seed to the people gathered on the sea shore to listen to him. According to Dodd: "A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearers by its vividness and strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt of its precise application to tease it into active thought." For Jesus the focus of the parable was the kingdom of heaven. Here in this parable Jesus Himself is the

sower of the seed. He is the Eternal Word incarnate, provides the seed and sows it into the hearts of the hearers in order to provide a harvest of thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold. The harvest depends on the fertility of the soil/soul where it gets planted in. But the Word Himself will not make the soil fertile; it just depends on how much seed falls on the soil and how receptive the soil is to the Word. The Father provides Jesus with His Divine Word for the sowing, which in turn bears fruit unto eternal life for those who are willing to listen. They are fed with the Living Bread come down from heaven, who is the Incarnate Word of God. When the Word of God is proclaimed, the seed is sown in the hearts of the faithful, which in turn fills them with a hunger for the divine. When the Living Bread come down from heaven and meets the receptive soil, there is the kingdom of heaven.

There are three distinct parts in today's Gospel: the parable of the sower, an interlude which explains why Jesus speaks in parables, and explanation of the parable and its allegorical interpretation, perhaps coming from the early church. A way of looking at this division is to regard the parable as being close to the actual words of Jesus. The concern of Matthew in this chapter is to account for the reason why so few of the Jews who heard the Gospel accepted it. In the parable itself the emphasis is on God the sower who works and produces results. The interpretation of the parable puts the emphasis more on people who listen to his word and here equated to the soil and the ways in which a person can respond. The interlude or comment in between gives the key to our response and subsequent fertility of the seed. In the parable, it is true that the seed falls many times on inhospitable soil but some will undoubtedly fall on rich soil and produce an abundant harvest. Hence we have the message from Prophet Isaiah who says that the word that goes from the mouth of God does not return to him empty, without carrying out his will and succeeding in the purpose for which it was sent.

The parable of the sower in the first part most probably comes from Jesus himself. He seems to have told it to encourage his disciples who were discouraged over seeing such small results from their work. Jesus emphasizes that the task of the disciples is to sow the seed. They cannot create the harvest since only God can do that. Not all the seed grows but some grows beyond all expectations. Sowing the seed which in fact is proclaiming the Good News requires faith that, if it is sown, God will make it grow. The disciples do not control the growth. Therefore they should not be discouraged over the lack of harvest. Instead they should rejoice wherever the seed has been fruitful. Jesus

compared people to four kinds of soil. Some people are like the hardened soil on the foot paths where people have walked, making the seed lie exposed, to be eaten by the bird or easily trampled by the travelers. Unreceptive, they hold on to the little they have, unwilling to accept anything new. Others like the rocky ground are those enthusiastic but unstable. They are shallow persons who are unable to consider anything seriously. The third type is those who like the seed that fell among thorns, a familiar picture of the thorny bush in Palestine. They do not permit them to grow freely. These possess proper disposition for spiritual growth but are distracted by secular interests. The good people at the apex of growth and development are free from all obstacles and produce fruit hundred fold, sixty or thirty depending on the soil. Only this land responds favorably to yield the fruit. The point of the parable is on the necessity of sowing. A disciple can only sow the seed but he has no power to make the seed grow. Only God can do it.

In the second part we have the interlude and the answer why Jesus speaks in parables and not in direct words. It seems as if only a few are able to grasp the meaning of these parables. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as being in the same prophetic line with the great Prophet Isaiah. The Prophet was told at the time when he received his commission to preach the message of God to people, not to expect his preaching to be successful. Instead his preaching was to bring out the people's hardness of heart which would be manifested in the way they rejected God's word. Matthew is saying that this is the same thing that happened when Jesus preached and taught. Those who rejected his preaching and mission did so out of their hardness of heart. There seems, especially in the quotation from Isaiah, a heavy sarcasm. Those who can see but are not able to understand and those who can hear but never get the message. This is not because they are stupid but because they basically do not want to. If they saw, if they really heard, they might be converted, they might have to change their ways radically - and that is the last thing they want to do. In the context of Matthew's gospel these words seem particularly directed at those of his people who rejected Jesus but it applies to all who close their ears in prejudice and fear. However, the gentiles seemed to be more attracted to the teachings of Jesus than the Jews. Hence Matthew concludes that some have the grace granted by God to grasp the mystery of the Kingdom.

All of this leads naturally into the third part, an interpretation of the parable on

the level of different kinds of hearing. Matthew stresses different kinds of soil as representing those who heard Jesus. Some seed falls on the path. There is no soil here necessary for cultivation but only has hard rough ground. There is no prospect of the seed taking root. Ears and eyes are closed and unreceptive to the Word of God. The seed falls on rocky ground in the field where there is a thin layer of soil. The seed takes root, begins to grow but soon gets burnt up by lack of water and the heat of the sun. It is like those Christians who, after baptism or after some spiritual experience, have a great rush of enthusiasm for God but, under the slightest pressure, soon run out of steam and fall away. Probably there was no real hearing, no real understanding and hence no real commitment. The seed falls on soil where there are many weeds and thorns. It gets smothered by the competing plants. This we may call the situation where a person wants the word but does not want to live it. He wants to be a good Christian but also wants to have all the things that the world around him thinks important, even if they are in conflict with the Gospel vision.

Let us take home with us today the fact that the conditions of the soil encountered by the sower are not necessarily in four different fields. Agricultural conditions in the Holy Land show that all four conditions may be found in one field. It is the same with each one of us. Sometimes we cannot take the word of God because our hearts are just too hard. Sometimes we are enslaved by the attractiveness of the world. Sometimes when the word of God is given to us we are crushed by the situations which take us away from God. Sometimes when conditions are just right we permit the rain of God's word to bring forth the blossoms of our love. If the results have been less than satisfactory, it is because we have not matured fully enough to produce the supernatural yield of which Jesus spoke.

There is clearly, of course, for us one place in particular where God's word is more clearly experienced and that is in Jesus Christ. For Jesus is the Word of God. Everything that Jesus said, everything that Jesus did was God communicating to us through him. We notice that in the life of Jesus many people refused to hear or to see the word of God placed before them. Even Jesus' closest disciples did not provide, at first, very promising soil. Jesus' life and mission seemed to end in tragic and dismal failure. It was precisely at that moment that the Word of God began to take root in people's hearts. Beginning, like the tiny mustard seed, like the small amount of yeast in a large batch of dough, the seed, the Word of God,

began to grow and flourish in the hearts of people. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the ongoing visible growth of the Catholic Church is a reflection of the ongoing invisible growth of the Kingdom of God.

A little Chinese girl about eight years old was a close observer of the Missionary priest of their village church. She used to watch him at his prayers in the church, listened closely to his teaching and preaching, and watched him as he went about visiting the sick or consoling those in sorrow and pain. She stopped with him and cheered people as he greeted them in the street. He always had a kind word, a smile, a little advice for the young and sometimes a sweet for the children. One day the girl went to the neighbouring village. They were having catechism that day and the Sister was telling them of the man who was always kind, who helped the sick, cheered up those discouraged and sad, who always went about doing good. Noticing the strange girl the Sister asked her if she knew who this Person was. The girl quickly replied: "He is the Missionary Father from our Village."

There once was a farmer who grew award-winning corn. Each year he entered his corn in the state fair where it won a blue ribbon. One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that the farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors. How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked. "Why sir," said the farmer, "didn't you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbors grow good corn."

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