



15TH SUNDAY A 2008 JULY 13, 2008

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ISAIAH 55:10-11 ROMANS 8:18-23

MATTHEW 13:1-23

Just as you and I are a product of our time and place, so was the human Jesus a product of His time and place. A carpenter and an itinerate Rabbi who grew up in a small town, His milieu was that of simplest men and women of the Middle East rather than aristocracy of Rome or the learned philosophers of Greece. He knew the tools of His trade: the saw, the plane, the level, but being part of a basically agrarian society He also knew about sheep and goats, what they ate, how they were cared for, and about the planting and nourishing of crops: wheat, barley, grapes. As a faithful Jew He also knew the Torah, the five great books of the Pentateuch, would have been spiritual food for Him as a child and a young man. He was no doubt also aware of the rabbinical commentaries on Scripture that were read and studied at the Synagogue. All of this was part of His world, part of His human knowledge, and part of the common knowledge that He shared with the men and women of Nazareth, Jerusalem, and the entire Middle East.

It was as such part of the knowledge that He used in communicating His spiritual teaching with those who come to hear His words, and so we don't find it strange that He speaks in parables that deal with shepherds and sheep or alludes to images that are found in the Old Testament. And as today as we hear this rather long Gospel we are not at all surprised to find Jesus telling the story, the parable, of the farmer sowing seed in his field. If we were to stop reading at verse nine where Jesus ends the story to the crowd, and returned to our homes we might begin to think about what He said and wonder what He meant if we had never heard the story before. Certainly Jesus wasn't simply telling the crowd how they should go about planting seed and what result they might expect. Most who listened to Him were probably aware from their own experience how such planting should be done. He never reveals while telling the parable what corresponds to the seed in His symbolic thinking, or what the various types of ground stand for.

It is the Apostles who question Jesus about His need to speak in parables, perhaps because they too are confused and don't understand what He is trying to tell them. Jesus tells them that "the knowledge of the mysteries of Heaven" has been given to them, but not to all. The explanation given in the final verses of today's Gospel are thought not to be the words of Jesus but those of Matthew or someone else who wished to explain the meaning of the parable

for his readers. What Jesus is saying is that He is the confident Sower of the Word, and He scatters the seeds of His words to the four winds, everywhere, so that all may have a chance to hear and to grow in His Word. While Jesus is prodigal in sowing the seed, He is quick to admit that it does not always bear fruit. All are capable of hearing the Word, but not all allow the Word to take root in their hearts. Even if the Word is received, if, however, it cannot take root because it is choked by our other worldly concerns or the inducement of riches, the Word is simply unable to bear fruit. The parable places the responsibility for such fruit not on the Sower but on the listener to nourish the Word in their hearts, which with the help of God's grace produces the fruit of lived faith. That is the simplicity and power of the parable.

We would all, of course, like to see ourselves as the rich soil that yielded fruit thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold, and at sometimes we are. An honest evaluation of self would probably reveal that our hearts are sometimes like the path that cuts through the fields where the soil is tramped down and made hard by constant foot traffic, and so the seed has no chance to take root because our ears refuse to hear the words of the Lord. Each of us from time to time has refused to listen to the Lord's call perhaps because our own selfishness shouts in our ears drowning out His gentle call. Sometimes our hearts are like rocky ground. We are immediately enthusiastic but always looking out for a better deal. Sometimes we are ground already rich with weeds and the Lord's Word is soon choked. Our sinfulness, our concern for the things of the world has won our hearts and there is no place for the Lord. And sometimes when our hearts are generous we are a rich soil that receives Christ and can fruitfully share Him with others.

Jesus undoubtedly first addressed this parable to His disciples who may have felt somewhat discouraged, but He also means it as a message of hope for all of us who might share that discouragement when we examine our Christian lives and become aware of just how little progress we may have made over the years. Failure and setbacks are a part of the human experience in our everyday lives as well as in our spiritual lives. The Word is ever present to us. For the Lord, there is no set season for sowing or reaping. Whenever we fail or stumble, or even turn our backs on the word, it is present to us around the next corner; in the next minute it is spoken loudly in our ears. The Lord of hope looks always for the moment when we are more receptive to His Word.

If the seed is a symbol of the Word in our Gospel, then in our First Reading from Isaiah the Word is symbolized by the rain and snow which comes down from heaven and does not return until it has watered the earth and made it fertile. Isaiah adds the inevitability of the Word accomplishing God's will in us as His people. The Word always bears fruit. This is the real message of hope both concerning the Word, and concerning our receptivity. It may take

time, we may be less receptive than we ought, but it continues to rain down on us, and sooner or later it will achieve the end for which it was sent.

Paul in our reading from the *Romans* this morning also invests himself in the great hope that whatever suffering we might endure here and now, it in no way compares to the glory that will be revealed for us. Paul makes it clear that there is no way of separating the Death and Resurrection of Christ and therefore there can be no way of separating the death and resurrection of believing Christians. For him, this present time in which we all live is a time of giving birth. It is painful, often very painful, but once birth occurs, we become so joyful to the point that one forgets the pain. In his words, “We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now, and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” This is the same hope held out for us as the seed constantly being sown, or the rain continually falling on us. God’s Word, and that is Christ, promises us certain hope if we put our trust in Him.

Most of us are not farmers, and if we were farmers today we would probably find the methods of our sower strange and inefficient. But, I think we all have some experience of this particular Farmer in our lives. We also know Him as the Shepherd that never lets us wander off without His following us to offer His saving grasp. The poet Francis Thompson called Him the *Hound of Heaven* who never gives up the hunt for the human soul.

Take some time to reflect on your own experience of God, of Christ as the *Sower* who has constantly sowed the seed of grace hoping that you will respond, or the *Shepherd* who has saved you from yourself time and time again when sinfulness has led you to a dangerous place, or the *Hound of Heaven* who you somehow know is always at your back to the point that you can almost feel His breath on you. We are sinners, and we are therefore not always receptive to God’s advances, and yet as reluctant and as stubborn as we may be, God never gives up on us.