



15th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, July 16, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 55:10–11

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 65:10–14 | **Response:** Luke 8:8

Second Reading: Romans 8:18–23

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:1–23, 13:1–9

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Last week we heard about a farming metaphor to do with ploughing – we heard Jesus explain that with Him, the yoke is easy and the burden is light.

And I tried to explain how this is so because we do not bear our burdens alone, or end up being yoked by ourselves – Jesus is standing next to us every step of the way and is sharing the load with us, taking on our sins and, ultimately, saving us.

Today we hear another agricultural metaphor in the familiar parable of the Sower who sows seeds everywhere: on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns and in good soil. Shrewd observers, however, might notice that there is no mention of ploughing here. The seed is simply freely given and the results are as they are. Depending on where it was planted, it either died immediately, started off well but ended suddenly, was eventually choked, or yielded a great harvest.

I'm sure the meaning of this is clear to us all, and we have probably heard this story many times. The fact that Jesus actually explains this parable and its meaning surely means he wants to leave us in no doubt.

We all know that the seeds which the sower is sowing represent the hearing of God's word which result in grace taking root in our hearts, and we are the beneficiaries of these seeds, God's grace. Our disposition to receive God's grace in our life, to live by His Word, is the sort of ground we have in ourselves.

But Jesus is telling his disciples this parable to make a point. Whereas in his other parables Jesus is explaining what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, in this parable Jesus is describing the reaction to hearing about the Kingdom. Jesus is telling his disciples that, precisely because they have faith in him and want to have a good grasp of his teaching, they will be given a deeper understanding of divine truths. They are blessed.

The question I think we have to consider is why do we find some graces easy to accept and others not; or put another way, how is it that some people can flourish from hearing God's word, and others are unable to transform themselves? Or even if we just look at ourselves: how is it that we can co-operate with God's grace in one area of our lives, but not in another. I'm sure we all can identify with this feeling of wanting to be fully authentic, fully whole, and yet knowing that we are incomplete, imperfect in some way. How do we understand this? This parable explains that there can be several reasons for this imperfect reception of God's grace as a result of properly hearing the Word of God: It could be down to the evil one's activity as the seed on the path is snatched away, which is analogous to our lack of prayer in a fast-paced consumer-centric society; or due to personal shallowness like the seed on rocky ground which describes many of those people who live an unreflected life; and it could even fail due to a person's worldly concerns and desires for wealth, even to the point of making an idol out of money, all of these are the thorns that choke the good seed, that blind us and smother any of our good intentions. It might also be an obsession that blinds us to the reality in our lives. So the parable doesn't just describe the situation, but it invites us to consider the reasons for that situation. Jesus is saying that the ideal disciple not only "hears the word" but also understands God's word as well.

Many of us, I'm sure, hear the Word of God – but understanding God's word, growing in grace and in wisdom, allowing that seed to grow, and nurturing that growth, is a life-long journey. It is only the disciples who are concerned with being the best possible soil to receive God's grace in his Word, that bear any fruit at all.

This must give us some hope – because I know that we all bear some fruit, at some point, in our lives. We must therefore not leave here today too critical of ourselves, because that would be to deny the goodness of God in our lives already.

But there is a danger to this approach. If we see ourselves, the disciples of Jesus, as being the good soil – it is possible to point to others as being the rocky ground, or the thorns, or the path. The temptation here is to judge others.

So we must be careful to not adopt an ‘insider-outsider’ approach. The ‘Jesus-has-a-clique’ approach and we are in it and they – whoever they are – are not, is not only not helpful, it is not true.

I think in truth, we all have the full variety of ground in us. Some areas of our life are ‘good soil’ and we truly show the fruits of God’s spirit in our good deeds, but we also have thorny patches, and rocky bits, areas where God’s grace is either grudgingly accepted, or finds no home in us, or perhaps lacks the foundation to truly cultivate the good habits we need for a virtuous life. Perhaps we are proud, or angry, unforgiving or unaccepting? Perhaps we can do this, but not that. We are, in other words, complicated beings. Our love for each other is conditional, rather than unconditional. This is perhaps why St Paul says in the 2nd reading: “but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” because all is not perfect at the moment, we are groaning and desiring redemption – but we are grateful not because of the suffering but because of the glory, as he says, that will be revealed to us. So we must be patient and allow God’s seed to bear fruit in ourselves.

Let us also remember that the Sower is sowing seeds without concern for where it lands. God does not have favourites – in the mystery of his Love – he loves each one of us with an infinite, unconditional love.

But each of us should respond to God’s love in an increasingly appropriate way. This leads me to pose another question: if we are to imitate God, and love like he did – what kind of sower am I? Do I discriminate in sharing my gifts? Or do I freely give as I have freely received? Can I identify the conditions I put down and offer them up to God so that I might become more like Jesus? Because if I can do that, then God’s word will truly transform me.

This question takes us to the First Reading which talks about the dramatic transformation God’s Word is capable of in our lives, like rain and snow in a desert land that bring new life, and refreshment to those who need it. This reading ends with a statement about the seed, the Word of God, saying: “but it shall accom-

plish that which I intend, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” God’s word is always fruitful, and always freely given. Even if it is fleeting in some people’s lives – God gives it for that moment where it might bear some fruit. Perhaps not immediately, maybe many years later – but it will prosper and grow. So we must not be discouraged from planting seeds, from sharing the Word of God, God’s good news, with other people. Because some seeds take a while to grow. For example, in our awareness of ecology, and of what Pope Francis talks about in Laudato ‘Si, this increasing understanding that we must set creation free from its bondage in our 2nd reading, is an example of a seed that once sown eventually is seen to yield a great harvest!

So let us pray that we might protect Creation and be able to say Yes to God in all, or at least, in increasing areas of our lives.

Let us pray that we might sow seeds in others and encourage them to cultivate those small pockets of good soil that we find in each other.

And let us pray that we might increase the good soil in us to truly hear and understand God’s word and allow it to change our hearts – even if we have to groan in pain during the transformation, as St Paul reminds us.

Because we have faith that God’s word will help us grow into what he desired we should become.

Amen.

Source: <https://sj.mcharlesworth.fr/homilies/2017-07jul-16-ya-ot-15/>

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