

## Homily: 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

This week's Gospel presents a bit of a challenge for the preacher, since it includes both a parable and an explanation of the parable given by the Lord Himself. It's as though Jesus gives us His own homily on His teaching. What more needs to be said? He makes it clear that some will receive His Word and take it to heart, whilst others will allow it to be choked, carried away, or scorched, so that it bears no fruit. It's both an invitation and a challenge: don't let the seeds of God's Word be wasted. Let your hearts be fertile ground for the Lord. The meaning is clear.

We might add, though, that the same can be said of other gifts of God. Mercy, for example – we can 'waste' the gift of forgiveness, or we can use it to prompt a genuine change in our hearts, and to allow us to become more merciful. And we can think of the grace we receive in all the sacraments. St John tells us that after Jesus had fed the 5000, He told the disciples to pick up all the scraps that were left, "so that nothing is wasted". These words, spoken by Our Lord at the end of a Eucharistic miracle, remind us that the grace of this sacrament must not be wasted either. So we can ask ourselves: how many times have I received Holy Communion with a heart that is fertile soil for this grace? How often do I allow the grace of this gift to pass me by? Especially for those who are just returning to Mass and able to receive Our Lord again, and for anyone who hopes to in the near future, it's a good moment to ask this question and to notice the value of this gift.

Jesus knew very well that His Word would be better received by some people than by others. In fact, in the Gospel we find examples of the various responses He describes today. There are those who hear Him but do not understand: sometimes great crowds of people listen to Him speak, but only a few ultimately follow Him. There are those who welcome the Word with joy until they find that it means taking up the cross, leaving behind their property, family, or way of life: the Word cannot take root in them. Then there are those who hear the Word but cannot respond because of the worries of this world or the lure of riches – the rich young man comes to mind. And there are those who, not without difficulties, do manage to hear and respond to the Lord's Word and yield a rich harvest for Him. We think first of the Apostles, but there are other examples – the woman at the well in St John's Gospel yields a rich harvest, having heard and understood the Lord.

One of the striking things about today's parable is the generosity of the sower. Before using our time or resources we might be tempted to think: "where will this have the greatest effect? Where should I target my efforts?" But the sower seems keen to sow the Word everywhere – even though he knows that in many places it will come to nothing. We see the generosity of God, who speaks to us even when our hearts are rocky ground and we find it difficult or impossible to hear Him. For God, generosity is greater than efficiency. We also see it in today's first reading, where rain and snow are used as an image of God's Word coming to earth. Rain falls everywhere – it doesn't simply fall on the fields or the plants that need it, or into the reservoirs; and likewise with snow: it falls indiscriminately, in places where we are grateful for it – the snow-topped mountains, perhaps, or in our gardens at Christmas – but also in the places where it's less welcome for us. Today's readings present

us with a strong contrast between God, who generously gives His Word, reveals Himself and offers His grace – and us, the recipients, who are so often slow to welcome these gifts.

Even our slowness, in the end, is a sign of God's goodness, because it's a sign of the freedom He has given us. In today's first reading Isaiah tells us that God's Word achieves what it is sent to do. When God speaks, things happen. God says "Let there be light" and there is light. God says, "This is my Body" and bread becomes His Body. But the human heart, alone in all of creation, has a choice – God's Word can be welcomed and achieve its aim, or it can be rejected or kept at bay. This is simply because God, in His goodness, has given us a freedom which He has not granted to any other part of His creation. We are free to accept or reject His Word, because He wants us to be free to love.

St John tells us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. When we accept the Word we welcome Jesus; when we neglect this Word, we reject Him. And recognising Jesus as the Word also helps us to understand Isaiah's teaching today: "As the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the Word that goes forth from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do." Jesus, the Word of God, has been sent forth to the earth: accepted by some, rejected by others. But He fulfilled His mission to preach, to heal, to save; His vocation to minister, to die and to rise again. Now He has returned to the Father, having carried out the Father's will and having succeeded in all that He was sent to do. He has come and offered salvation. May our hearts be fertile soil to receive Him, and His gifts.

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