

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: So, What Are You Going to Do about It?

Today's Gospel contains the Parable of the Sower, and an explanation of the parable. Between the parable and its explanation there is a difficult passage about acting on the gifts we have been given.

The parable and its explanation are centered on ancient farming practices. In Jesus' time and in His part of the world, fields were harvested in June and then left barren during the hot, dry summer. By the Fall the ground was quite hard. However, the farmers knew that the rain would be coming soon, so in the Fall the farmers would plant the crop for the next year's harvest. Most of our Florida farmers do the same thing--plant in the Fall to harvest in the Spring. But the ancient farmer did not plant like the modern farmer plants. The modern farmer plants in three steps: he ploughs, then sows seed, then covers the seed over. The ancient farmer planted in two steps. Farming began with a sower who went through the fields scattering seed. He was followed by a ploughman who would plough the seed under. That's why the seed that fell on the footpaths was useless. The ploughman wasn't about to plough the footpaths under. The seed that fell on rocks wouldn't be ploughed under either. It might develop some roots, but they would not be strong enough for the plant to survive. As far as the thorns were concerned, the Mid East has world class thistles. Thistle plants grow over six feet tall. The only seed that had a chance of surviving would be that which fell on good soil. Therefore the simple meaning of the parable is "Be Good Soil."

Good soil needs help. The farmer fertilizes it, makes sure it receives nutrients that will help the seed grow, and of course, he waters the soil.

God is the farmer. We are the soil. The seed is His Word. God doesn't just sow the seed, and leave us expecting us to nurture the seed ourselves. He nurtures us. He waters us. He gives us the capacity to be the very best soil.

Between the parable and the interpretation of the parable is a section that is quite difficult. The disciples ask Jesus why He speaks in parables. He answers that those who are closest to Him hear Him speaking candidly, but those who do not hear the simple messages of the parables demonstrate the fulfillment of a prophecy of Isaiah. "Listen and you will not understand, look and you will not see."

What is this all about? Is this addressed to us? Are we doomed to never understand the Lord? Is Jesus trying to keep His message secret from us or from others? Is Jesus trying to keep people from receiving His salvation? None of that can be true; yet we are faced with the words: "They have scarcely heard with their ears, they have firmly closed their eyes, otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and then turn back to me, and I should heal them."

The solution to these questions comes from the source of the quotation, from

the sixth chapter of the *Book of Isaiah*. In this chapter the prophet has a vision of God sitting on His throne and attended by the Seraphim, angels. Isaiah hears them singing "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts." He is convinced that he is going to die because he has no right to be in the presence of the Holy One. One of the angels then touches his mouth with a burning coal and declares that Isaiah's guilt has been purged. Next Isaiah hears a voice calling out, "Whom shall I send, who will go for us?" Isaiah responds, "Here I am, send me." It is right at this point that we have the passage that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel. The voice says to Isaiah, "*Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.*"

The meaning behind this is that the message of the prophet will result in the people knowing what they have to do, but they will avoid doing it. Think about Pharaoh back in the days of Moses when the Egyptians held the Hebrews in slavery. Remember, Moses revealed God's will to Pharaoh that the people should be freed. He proved the message with great miracles, the Nile turning into blood, the plagues, etc. But Pharaoh refused to listen. His guilt was great because he knew God's will. Pharaoh hardened his heart. Back to *Isaiah*. The people would hear *Isaiah*, but would be more determined not to abandon their sinful attitudes, and thus their sin would be greater.

By quoting this passage, Jesus is saying that many who hear the Word of God He proclaims will fulfill the prophecy of *Isaiah* 6. They will become hardened against the truth and more determined not to follow it. Jesus wants them to turn to Him and be healed, but He knows that for many people, human nature will result in the fulfillment of the *Isaiah's* prophecy. A good example of this is that of people who hear about the development of a human being inside a mother, they know that sonograms would show a human life, but they become even more determined to support abortion. Another example would be that of people presented with the reasons why capital punishment can no longer be justified, but they simply do not want to hear this and chance changing their long held position.

Now that you know, what are you going to do about it? That is the challenge that confronts us today. We have been given the knowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the Word made Flesh. We have heard him calling us to a new way of life, one of love and concern for others, one that does not give in to hatred. We have heard that Jesus identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, and all whom some people have relegated to the fringe of society. "Whatever you did for them you did for me," we read in Matthew 25. We know that we have been given a great deal. So, the Gospel asks us, "What are we going to do about it?"

We cannot ignore the Word of God. We cannot consider it only when it is convenient for us to do so. The charge given in to Timothy in 2 *Timothy* 4 is given to every one of us:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power, proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient;

Catholicism is not just a religion. It is a way of life. Christianity is a way of life. We have been given the grace to live this life. The seed has been showered upon us.

We pray today that we might be good soil.