

## Commentary to the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A –

Between Heaven and Earth: Te World



### Introduction

What reliability does man's word offer?

Not much. Dejected and disappointed, the psalmist kept repeating: "Help us, O Lord, none of the godly are left, the faithful have vanished. Everyone lies; with flattering lips they speak from a double heart" (Ps 12:1-2). Today, the word continues to be devaluated: One does not believe in the promises. One feels secured only by written and signed documents: We hear "deeds and not words," repeated.

Is it so with the word of God?

This refrain is repeated ten times in the first chapter of Genesis: "God said ... and so it happened." "The heavens were created by his word. For he spoke and so it was, he commanded and everything stood

firm” (Ps 33:6.9). His word is not like that of man’s. It is living and effective, implements what it announces, does not lie nor disappoint.

The Greek mystic proposed to enter into a relationship with God through visions, ecstasies, raptures, paroxysmal trance. Biblical spirituality instead puts listening in the first place, because it is convinced of the absolute reliability of God's word.

"Hear, o Israel” is the most beloved prayer of the Jewish pity (Dt 6:4). "Hear the warning of Yahweh" recommend the prophets (Is 1:10, Jer 11:3). "Obedience (listening) is better than sacrifice,” says Samuel (1 S 15:22). "Sacrifice and oblation you did not desire: but my ears you have pierced” says the Psalmist (Ps 40:7).

In the Bible, listening does not mean to receive a communication or information, but to adhere to, to receive, to keep in one’s heart and put into practice a proposal. It is equivalent to granting trust to God

Those who listen to his word with these provisions are blessed (Lk 11:28).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

*“A fertile ground, receptive to the word of God, is present even in the most hardened sinner.”*

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |  
Gospel-----

### **First reading: Isaiah 50:10-11**

God is in heaven and man is on earth (Ecl 5:1). Petitions go up to the Lord. He listens and responds by sending his word, a worker of prodigies (Ps 147:15-18). The docile inanimate beings obey God: "he does what he pleases with the army of heaven" (Dn 4:32), "He sends the light, and it goes, who recalls it and trembling it obeys. He calls the stars and they answer, ‘Here we are.’ They shine with joy for their Creator" (Bar 3:33-35).

It is not so with man. The word of God can act in free beings only when accepted, if it falls on a fertile ground that allows it to produce fruits.

The passage that closes the book of Deutero-Isaiah is proposed to us today. It is a hymn to the life-giving effectiveness of the Word of God. To understand and enjoy it, it is necessary to place it in the historical context in which it was composed.

We are in the second half of the IV century A.C. The Israelites had been in Babylon for many years. With a growing insistence, they put themselves the question: will we be able to return and see our land one day?

A prophet was sent to announce the upcoming liberation to these tired and torn down people.

Some years pass but nothing happens and the delay increases the disappointment and despair. How come—we wonder—the word of God is not realized? Does he, too, like people, not keep anymore his promises?

The prophet responds to this doubt with an image. The word of God is like the rain and snow. They fall from the sky and do not return there without having produced what they were intended. They possess an irresistible dynamism, energy that is fruitful and makes the grain sprout, the grass green and the flowers. The word sent from heaven never returns to God "empty-handed." It always brings with it some fruit. The results, of course, depend also on the land where it falls but where it goes nothing stays the same.

The image of rain and snow and the reference to the cycle of the seasons and the slow growth of the seed is an invitation not to expect immediate results. The word of God often acts in a long time because it has to deal with the reactions, choices, decisions, and even with the hardening, stubbornness of persons. It takes patience, ability to wait, foresight, combined with the unwavering confidence in the life-giving power of the word.

The Israelites deported to Babylon were able to wait. They maintained firm the belief that "upright is the Lord's word and worthy of trust is his work" (Ps 33:4). After a few years, a first group was able leave Mesopotamia and to return to the land of their fathers.

Anyone who trusts the word of the Lord will one day verify the prodigious effects.

### **Second Reading: Romans 8:18-23**

If one finds himself in a maze, he thinks deeply, turns and despairs but ends up finding himself at the starting point. Only a pair of wings that raise him up would allow him to contemplate from above the position where he is and to discover the path to freedom.

What is happening on the ground, the agitation of people, the often absurd turn of events and the dramas remain unexplained enigmas until one goes up to heaven, to God. If, with the Lord, the more distant horizons are noticed, one can make sense of what is happening in the world. The reality in which we live presents undeniable reasons to be pessimistic, but whoever enters God's perspective recovers, though often with difficulty, serenity and hope.

Creation—Paul says—was subjected to futility, slavery, corruption and cries her pain. It was involved in an absurd project, as opposed to the one who made it. Sin and selfishness have disrupted it. Now man is seized by fear of facing the consequences of his mistakes. He sees the fertility of the earth, the healthiness of the air, the cleanliness of water being threatened. He notices the damages caused to plants and animals. He knows that the seabeds are filled with toxic waste and bombs. This creation is waiting to be redeemed: He wants it led back into God's plan that he initially had contemplated with satisfaction what he had made, because "it was very good" (Gn 1:31).

Paul invites us not to despair and not to interpret the cry of pain of creation as that of a dying man. It is quite similar to that of the woman in labor who is about to give birth to a new life.

Christians do not remain insensitive to the groan of creation, but they do not break down because they are confident that, despite appearances to the contrary, the word of God will bring to completion the new creation.

### **Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23**



Theologians and preachers wisely expose very deep truth but sometimes they use a complicated, confusing, difficult to follow language. They give the impression of not caring whether the people understand, are interested, enthusiastic or simply bored. Jesus had a different pedagogical approach: even when he faced tough issues, he always used a simple language. He resorted to comparisons and images; He told stories set in the life of shepherds, fishermen, traders, tax gatherers, and most importantly, farmers among whom he was born and grew up.

The parable—said the rabbis—is like the wick of a candle: it costs a few cents, and yet, even if its light is dim, it can make one find a treasure.

Today, Jesus introduces a very difficult theological theme. It is a puzzle to which the most acute minds and noblest spirits of mankind have tried in vain to give an answer: "Why evil?" "Why does the kingdom of God encounters many difficulties to succeed?" He faces it with his usual method: the parable.

The passage is clearly divided into three parts. The first (vv. 1-9) consists of the parable. The second (vv. 10-17) contains some not easy to interpret sayings of Jesus. In fact, they seem to imply that he does not want his listeners to be converted. The third (vv. 18-23) is an application of the parable to the life of the community.

Before commenting on each of the three parts, we make a premise. Biblical scholars agree in recognizing that the explanation of the parable, although placed on the lips of Jesus and perfectly reflects his thought, has not been directly announced by him. By whom then?

The early Christians, in giving catechesis to their communities, they were not anxious to transmit literally what Jesus had said. They tried, rather, to make his message understandable and effective, applying it to concrete situations in their lives. They were convinced that the evangelists did not have to act as simple repeaters to be faithful to the word of the Master. They must make his message updated. Who in fact exactly repeats the words of a person does not always authentically refer to his

thought.

The early Christians some times have changed a bit one or the other parable, or have added an explanation to fit the situation of their communities.

It is the case of the parable proposed to us today. Jesus told it to teach his listeners. The early Christians have reinterpreted and applied it to the concrete problems in their lives, problems that were not exactly the same as those of the disciples who heard Jesus. The updated catechesis is thus born as found in vv. 18-23.

We begin by clarifying the meaning and the message the parable had in the mouth of Jesus. Then, after having interpreted the difficult central verses, we will explain its reading done by the community of Matthew.

A strange way to sow (vv. 1-9).

In the parable there is a detail that immediately draws attention: the waste of seeds scattered in large quantities in a barren land. The farmer's behavior is surprising. He seems to act unwisely. Exactly three-quarters of the story are dedicated to the grain that ended up on the road, in stony places or among thorns and and devoured by birds, burned or stifled.

The insistence on the waste, failure and disappointing prospects is an important element. It reflects the reality of the world in which evil appears much stronger, more efficient than good. Note also its progressive, relentless dominance: the seed does not sprout, that which sprouts does not grow, that which grows is suffocated..

On whom does it depend? Why does this happen? If God is good why does his kingdom not grow unchallenged? These are the questions that Jesus wanted to give an answer.

To understand the parable it should be noted that at that time the sowing was done before and not after the field had been prepared. The farmer sowed before plowing, hoeing, eradicating the brambles and removing the stones. It is then understood why part of the seed could fall between the stones in the midst of weeds, among the thorns or above those little paths that are formed in the fields when they are crossed during harvest or during the period in which the fields are fallowed.

Whoever observes the farmer in the parable is inclined to think that he is working in vain and wasting seed and energy. It is hard to believe that, in a field reduced to that state, something can sprout. Instead, after sowing, he plows: the paths disappear, thorns and grass are removed, the stones moved and the field that seemed unproductive, after a short time, is covered first by corn stalks, then by blonde ears. A true miracle!

Jesus tells this parable in a difficult moment of his life. In Nazareth he is cast out, in Capernaum he is taken as mad, the Pharisees want to kill him and the disciples abandon him. It just seems that all his preaching has fallen in vain. The conditions are too unfavorable; his word seems destined to die (cf. Mt 11-12).

With this parable he wanted to send a message to his discouraged disciples who asked him about the usefulness of the apostolic work he was doing: despite all the contradictions and obstacles, his word would have given abundant fruit because it has in itself an irresistible force of life.

Contrary to all expectations, the coming of the Messiah was not sensational. It did not have great resonance. His passage through this world seemed to be among the most insignificant. It has not changed anything in the people's social and political life. The Baptist was more famous than him. Jesus disappeared into the ground like a small, weak, almost invisible seed. However, after a short time, this seed has begun to sprout. The gospel has raised humanity and we, today, can verify that the message of the parable of the sower is taking place.

All of us sometimes wondered if it's worth proclaiming the word of God in a corrupt world and society as those in which we live; if it still make sense to speak of the evangelical beatitudes and teach catechism to people who do not listen, whose heart are hardened, who think only about money, entertainment, and to what is transitory, fleeting, ephemeral. Are not the evangelizers, catechists, perhaps sowing in vain?

When these thoughts arise it is time to profess the faith in the divine power contained in the word of the gospel.

Why does Jesus speak in parables? (vv. 10-17).

In the middle of his public life Jesus takes stock and finds that very few people have accepted his message. Is there something to wonder of this fact? No, he replies. Even the Old Testament prophets were not being listened to. At the time of Isaiah, for example, people covered their ears in order not to hear the word of God. They hardened their hearts so as not to convert (vv. 14-15).

Here is the reason why he resorts to parables: He makes a new attempt to break the deadlock. He thinks that, with this simple and concrete language, it will be easier to make inroads into the hearts of his listeners. The parable forces one to reflect, to look for the hidden meaning, to think, to fall into oneself and then to get converted.

These verses are an invitation to open, as soon as possible, the eyes, ears and heart otherwise the parables remain as enigmatic stories and do not produce any fruit.

The four types of soil (vv. 18-23).

The application of the similitude to the life of the community aims to help the disciples to identify the difficulties that the word of God encounters in everyone. The scarcity of results does not depend neither on the seed nor the sower, but on the type of soil.

There is first of all a hardened heart, made as such—as it happens with the soil of a road—by many people who have walked on it. It represents the impenetrable heart to the word of Christ because it has assimilated the way of thinking of this world, adapted to current morality and adopted the values proposed by the people. This is the evil one, the devastating demon that sneaks into the thoughts and feelings, filling them with meanness, frivolity, proposals of meaningless life, and senseless reasoning.

Then there is a variable heart that gets easily excited but after a few days, it goes back to what it was before. It 's like a rock covered with a thin layer of earth: if one plants a seed, this sprouts, but immediately dries up.

There is also a restless heart that is stirred by the problems of this world. It chases success and wealth and nourishes mean dreams. These concerns are like thorns; they choke the seed of the word.

Finally there is a good heart in which the gospel produces abundant fruit.

It is not about the four categories of persons, but four interior dispositions that are found in different proportions, in every person. It is useless that the evangelist, to launch the precious seed of the word, waits to find the ideal terrain, that which is perfectly fertile. Good soil, thorns, rocks and arid soil will always be together. For some, this will be a source of discouragement, but for the true apostles, authentic catechist it will become a stimulus to a more abundant sowing. Many efforts will be in vain, but one day, punctually, the ear will make its appearance in every person.

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