

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: THE WORD

Introduction

How reliable is someone's word? Not very. 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: We do not believe promises. Only written and signed documents give security: 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 entering into a relationship with God through visions, ecstasy, rapture, and paroxysmal trances. But Biblical spirituality puts listening in first place because it is convinced of the absolute reliability of God's Word. "*Hear, O Israel*" is the most beloved prayer of Jewish piety (Deut 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 receiving communication or information but adhering to, receiving, and keeping in our heart and putting into practice a proposal. It is equivalent to trusting in God. Those who listen to his word in this way are blessed (Lk 11:28).

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

First Reading: Isaiah 55:10-11

Thus says the Lord: Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

“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 wonders (Ps 147:15-18). 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 the human being? The Word of God can act in the free only when accepted and falls on fertile ground that allows it to produce fruit. 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 read it in the historical context in which it was composed.

We are in the second half of the fourth century BC. The Israelites had been in Babylon for many years. With a growing insistence, they ask themselves this 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 worn-down people. Some years pass, but nothing happens, and the delay increases their disappointment and despair. How come—we wonder—the Word of God is not realized? Does he, too, like the people, not keep his promises anymore?

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 without having produced what they were intended to produce. They possess an irresistible dynamism, abundant energy that makes the grain sprout, the grass green, and the flowers bloom. The Word sent from heaven never returns to God 'empty-handed.' It always brings with it some fruit. The result, of course, also depends on the land where it falls, but where it does fall, 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 over a long time because it must deal with the people's reactions, choices, decisions, and even with the hardening and stubbornness. It takes patience, the ability to wait, foresight combined with the unwavering confidence in the life-giving power of the Word.

The Israelites exiled in Babylon were able to wait. They maintained the firm belief that *"upright is the Lord's Word and worthy of trust is his work"* (Ps 33:4). After a few years, the first group was able to leave Mesopotamia and return to the land of their fathers. Anyone who trusts the Word of the Lord will one day verify the wonders of its fulfillment.

Second Reading: Romans 8:18-23

Brothers and sisters: I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. 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.

If we find ourselves in a maze, we think deeply, turn and despair, but end up finding ourselves at the starting point. Only a pair of wings that could carry us high would allow us to contemplate from above the position we are in and see a clear path to freedom.

What is happening on the ground, people's agitation, the often-absurd turn of events, and the drama remain unexplained enigmas until we get to heaven, to God. If with the Lord, with the more distant horizons in sight, can we make sense of what is happening in the world. The reality we live in 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 out in pain. It was the absurdity of this world, quite opposite to the intelligence of the one who made it. Sin and selfishness have disrupted it. Now the people are seized by fear in facing the consequences of his mistakes. They see the fertility of the earth, the healthiness of the air, the cleanliness of water is threatened. They notice the damage caused to plants and animals. They know that the seabed is 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*" (Gen 1:31).

Paul invites us not to despair and not interpret the cry of pain of creation as that of a dying person. It is like 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

On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. Whoever has ears ought to hear."

The disciples approached Jesus and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because *they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand*. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: *You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and be converted, and I heal them.*

“But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

“Hear then the parable of the sower. The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.”

Theologians and preachers wisely expose the depth of truth, but sometimes they use complicated, confusing, and complex language to follow. They give the impression of not caring whether people understand, are interested, enthusiastic, or simply bored. Jesus had a different pedagogical approach: He always used simple language even when he faced tough situations. He resorted to comparisons and images. He told stories set in the life of shepherds, fishing people, 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 help find a treasure.

Today, Jesus introduces a radically complex theological theme. It is a puzzle, which humankind's acutest minds and noblest spirits have tried in vain to unravel: ‘Why evil?’ ‘Why do so many obstacles stand in the way of the Kingdom of God?’ He addresses it in his usual way: 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 sayings of Jesus that are not easy to interpret. 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 community's life. Commenting on each of the three parts, we establish a premise. Biblical scholars agree that the explanation of the parable, although placed on the lips of Jesus and perfectly reflecting his thought, has not been directly announced by him. By whom then?

In giving catechesis to their communities, the early Christians were not anxious to transmit literally what Jesus had said. They tried, instead, to make his message understandable and practical, applying it to concrete situations in their lives. They were convinced that the evangelists did not have to simply repeat to be faithful to the Word of the Master. They must update his message. Those who, in fact, repeat the exact words of a person do not always authentically refer to their thought.

The early Christians sometimes have changed the parables a bit or have added an explanation to fit the situation of their communities. This is the case of the parable proposed to us today. Jesus told it to teach his listeners. The early Christians have reinterpreted it and applied it to the concrete problems in their lives, which were not precisely the same as those of the disciples who sat at Jesus' feet. The updated catechesis is thus born as found in vv. 18-23.

We begin by clarifying the meaning and the message of the parable when it came out of the mouth of Jesus. Then, after interpreting the difficult central verses, we will explain it, as did the community of Matthew. A strange way to sow (vv. 1-9) In the parable, a detail immediately draws attention: the seed wasted by scattering large quantities on barren land. The farmer's behavior is surprising. He seems to act unwisely. Exactly three-quarters of the story is dedicated to the grain that ended up on the road, in stony places, or among thorns and was devoured by birds, burned or stifled. The insistence on 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 answer. To understand the parable, it should be noted that the sowing was done before and not after the field had been prepared. The farmer sowed before plowing, hoeing, or eradicating the brambles and removing the stones. It is then understood why part of the seed could fall between the rocks amid weeds, among the thorns, or above those little paths formed in the fields when they are crossed during harvest or during the period in which the fields are fallow.

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 at 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 been 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 borne abundant fruit because it had 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 he was. Jesus disappeared into the ground like a tiny, weak, almost invisible seed. However, after a short time, this seed began 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 wonder if it is worth proclaiming the Word of God in the corrupt world and society in which we live; if it still makes sense to speak of the evangelical beatitudes and teach catechism to people who do not listen, whose hearts are hardened, who think only about money, entertainment and to what is transitory, fleeting or temporary. Are not the evangelizers, catechists, perhaps sowing in vain? When these thoughts arise, it is time to profess our 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 few people have accepted his message. Is this something to wonder about? No, he replies. Even the Old Testament prophets were not 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 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 us to reflect, look for the hidden meaning, think, look into ourselves, and be converted. These verses are an invitation to open, as soon as possible, our 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 resemblance to the community's life aims to help the disciples identify the difficulties that the Word of God encounters in everyone. The scarcity of results depends 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 our thought patterns and feelings, filling them with meanness, frivolity, proposals of a meaningless life, and senseless reasoning.

Then there is a variable heart that is easily excited, but after a few days, goes back to what it was before. It is like a rock covered with a thin layer of the earth: it sprouts if we plant a seed 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 unrealistic 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 people but four interior dispositions found in different proportions in every person. There is no point in the evangelist waiting to find the ideal terrain to launch the precious seed of the Word. Good soil, thorns, rocks, and arid soil will always make up a single terrain. This will be a source of discouragement for some, but authentic catechists will become a stimulus to more abundant sowing for the true apostles. Many efforts will be in vain, but one day, the ear will make its appearance in every person in good time.

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READ: The division between the followers of Jesus and the religious leaders has deepened. Now Jesus will begin to teach in parables, encouraging his followers to think about the meaning of the parables and their application.

REFLECT: Jesus' parables refer to ordinary life yet are sufficiently complex to tease the mind into active thought. Think about how the parable of the sower can apply to anyone's life today.

PRAY: External events and circumstances can hinder a person from receiving and living according to the Word of God. Daily prayer to avoid such circumstances and events can be helpful. 'Do not let us get in over our heads and save us from all evil.'

Fernando Armellini