

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn-and I would heal them.'

"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell 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. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

REFLECTION 1: JESUS THE SOWER

What a wonderful scene greets our eyes as we read once more the parable of the Sower and the Seed! (Matt 13: 1-23) – An idyllic landscape of crowds on the shores of Lake Galilee and Jesus seated in a boat just off the beach using the vessel as a kind of pulpit. He looks onto the surrounding hills and there he observes a lone farmer sowing seed. The Greek original tells us that this wasn't any kind of sower rather this is 'the sower who went out to sow'. Jesus' eyes track the sower, so the crowd can now focus on his text as he begins 'Look at the sower there in the field, sowing his seed'. Jesus was gently moving from the moment they could actually see, in order to open the peoples' minds to truths they had never seen before.

Now there were two ways that farmers in those days sowed seed. They could scatter the seed from a satchel or hoist a bag of seed onto the back of a donkey, slit the bag and allow the seed to scatter as the donkey moved among the ridges. Both were extravagant ways as, on undressed soil, much of the seed could be lost, trampled on, falling on stony soil, among thorns, consumed by birds or simply be blown away by the wind. However, some seed did fall onto fertile soil, germinating and producing an abundant harvest.

Jesus instructed his audiences by means of parables. Parables are not found exclusively in the New Testament, but the Gospel parables are the best known. Although simple and familiar, these skilfully composed narratives must not be taken lightly as if they were mere pleasant but inconsequential stories. One feels that each is rich in meaning, even though this meaning is not immediately evident, at least not in all its depth. It takes time to understand exactly what Jesus teaches in parables. In order to understand parables, those who hear them must be alert and open to the things of God. Parables are aimed at hearers who accept confrontation and questioning. As a mirror image of what God is like, they pit themselves against this ideal and realise how their thoughts and actions fall short of God's standards.

Jesus is this confident sower who has scattered his word, a seed of high quality to the four winds, but he does not hide the fact that part of that seed-spread is lost. What is in question is the word of the kingdom. It is lavishly sown and the Lord wants to address all without discrimination. The sower does not make distinctions between different soils, he simply distributes the seed. His word concerns everybody, but can only deliver its potentiality if it falls on favourable ground. After the word has been heard it must descend into the heart. Even though it may first be received with joy it may fail to germinate when encumbered by the lure of riches and the cares of the world and so cannot thrive. Thanks to the generous manner in which the seed is sown, we witness the extraordinary fruitfulness of a single seed encountering good soil – it gives a 100, 60 or 30 fold.