

Fifteenth Sunday Per Annum (A)

July 13, 2014.

Then the disciples came and asked Jesus, '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' (Mt. 13:11).

Our Lord's answer to the disciples' question may seem harsh and perhaps even unfair at first hearing. They are evidently concerned that many in the crowd do not understand what He is saying. Our Lord however, quotes the Prophet Isaiah and asserts that this prophecy is fulfilled in those listening as it was in Isaiah's own day: *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.* (Mt. 13:14-15) What we are given here is an image of persons completely opposed or indifferent to what is being said. Sadly, this prophecy will continue to be fulfilled while people only listen to what they want to hear or what they think Jesus should be saying.

In the Gospels the word *mystery* is found precisely three times (Mt. 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Lk. 8:10), one of which is in our Gospel text today; and in each instance it refers to the mystery of the kingdom which is only revealed to the disciples. Our text translates the Greek for *mysteries* (μυστήρια) as *secrets* but the meaning is obvious. Though undefined, the *mystery of the kingdom* is generally understood to refer to *the present reality of the kingdom in the person of Jesus, which is recognized only by divine revelation* (J. McKenzie, s. j., *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 597). Simply expressed, Jesus is the Kingdom. *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... and to hear what you hear* (Mt. 13:16-17). We share in this blessedness because we recognise the present reality of the kingdom in the person of Jesus and we have opened our hearts to the truth of His word. This blessedness is the consequence of the act of faith that we have made and continue to make in Christ our Lord. The Epistle to the Hebrews defines faith as *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (11:1). The parable that we have just heard invites us to see and hear beyond the obvious meaning of the text and perceive in these words the hidden Reality that is God Himself.

The parable of the sower is no less the *parable of the soils or grounds* since in the explanation of the parable our Lord seems to focus on four different soils. Evidently, the dispositions or attitudes of those who receive God's word bring about different results. This speaks to the reality of our free will and to the absolute necessity of the act of faith that each one of us can only make himself or herself. It is always a personal act: *I believe in One God...* We who have undertaken the path of discipleship and who recognise in Jesus the reality of God's kingdom understand that whatever fruits we may bear, it is *only God who gives the growth* (1Cor. 3:7).

In the Sundays to come we will continue to read the parables of our Lord and so deepen our understanding of God who has revealed Himself in Christ. The Gospel of St. Matthew which we are reading this year, contains two collections of parables: eight parables depicting the present character of the Kingdom of God (13:1-52), and an equal number of end-time Kingdom parables (24:32-25:46). Our Lord's method of preaching was such that His parables are meant *to lead gradually to the hidden reality that can be truly discovered only through discipleship* (Pope Benedict XVI). As such, we might say of this

approach that it was akin to inductive reasoning, where we begin with specific observations, begin to detect patterns and finally end up developing some general conclusions or theories. The lesson of this parable is very clear: *But what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit* (Mt. 13: 23). Yet, chances are that at different times in our lives most of us have stood on or perhaps even lived of these different kinds of soil in relation to God and the things of God: perhaps we have been as *a person who has no root* or distracted by *the cares of the world and the lure of wealth* or because of our inability to understand we allowed the evil one to come and snatch away what was sown in our heart. It may also be that people who are very close to us and whom we love very much stand on such soil.

Tough I know very little of farming, I well understand that the farmer must be patient. There are times when a field is fallow; while ploughed, it remains unseeded not that it may be abandoned but that it may regain fertility. Our Lord does not speak of such soil in our Gospel but this metaphor also allows us to understand that there are times in life when all we can do is prepare and wait and imitate the patience of God. St. Peter reminds us that *our Lord's patience means salvation* (2 Pt. 3:15). Though we may have resolved long ago to follow our Lord along the path of discipleship, the path of devout humility, the truth is that *always we begin again*. Today we have listened to this familiar parable, this saving word in a time like no other. Perhaps more than at any other time in human history, in this world of ours we face a barrage of words from a variety of sources: television, radio, internet, phones, texts, tweets – exhausting! All these words can in fact compete and even drown out the *word of the kingdom*. The world is filled with noises and many words but we have come to know and to believe that *the word of the Lord abides forever* (1 Pt. 1:25). It is in the firm foundation of *the Word of God [that] is living and active* (Heb. 4:12) that we seek to be grounded so that we may hear the Word, understand it and bear its fruit.

The parable of the sower or of the *soils and grounds* in essence, affirms the truth that it is possible to say either yes or no to the gift of salvation, or even to be indifferent to it. The parable however also helps us to understand that in the response we give to the word of God the mercy of God is such that it allows for our imperfect response and even our indifference. The parables of our Lord affirm and reveal that God *is rich in mercy* (Eph. 2:4). Mercy is love coping with evil. Mercy is love that loves though it has not been loved. Mercy is love given to those who have stolen love from us. The fruit that we must all bear is mercy. God wants from us what we want from Him. So as we begin again and listen to and receive the Word of Christ our Saviour, we do well to heed the opening words of the *Rule of St. Benedict* (one of the most influential books in history): *Listen carefully, my son, to the Master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart*. Many are the lessons that can be drawn from our Lord's parables. If we offer Him a welcome in our mind he will reveal to us the *mysteries of the kingdom*. However, *if we wish to dwell in the tent of His kingdom, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds* (*The Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue, v. 22).