

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 55:10-11

Until the eighteenth century it was presumed that Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote all 66 chapters of the book under his name. At that time scholars maintained that chapters 40 through 66 were written by a different author who lived some 150 years after Isaiah, during the Babylonian exile. In the late nineteenth century a scholar put forth convincing arguments for yet a third author for chapters 56 through 66. Our reading for today comes from the concluding chapter of what is now referred to as Deutero- (or 2nd) Isaiah: the chapter which has been titled “Conclusion to the Book of Comfort.” Almost every major theme within chapters 40 through 54 is blended into this chapter with verses ten and eleven (our reading for today) being a concluding announcement of salvation.

¹⁰ For 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 him who sows and bread to him who eats, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

The word comes gently from God, never intended to remain suspended like clouds in midair, but to soak the earth and to be drawn back toward God like plants and trees. God’s spirit is infused within human beings where it brings forth divine fruits.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:18-23

Last week we heard Saint Paul tell us that Christian life is lived in the Spirit and is destined for glory because Christian life is empowered by the Spirit. This week this theme is continued as he begins to describe our future glory.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.

Be rational. Don’t lose sight of the rewards which have been promised to those who are faithful. Although suffering is a sign of the authentic Christian experience, it is only a transition to the assured glory that awaits us in the end.

“It is fitting for us, meditating upon the glory of this splendor, to endure all afflictions and persecutions because, although the afflictions of the just are many, yet those who trust in

God are delivered from them all.” [Saint Cyprian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 250), *Letters* 6(2)]

19 For creation awaits with eager expectation

This is material creation apart from human beings. Created for human beings, the world was cursed as a result of Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:17). Since then the material creation has been in a state of chaos; of abnormality and frustration; being subject to corruption and decay.

the revelation of the children of God;

Saint Paul sees the world sharing in the destiny of humanity, somehow freed of its proclivity to decay. This recalls Yahweh’s promise to Noah of the covenant to be made “between myself and you and every living creature.” (Genesis 9:12-13).

20 for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it,

The frustration of material creation is its inability to realize its goal as it should. Before Adam’s sin, material creation was subject to him, just as he was subject to God (Genesis 1:28). Man’s sin disrupted this subordination and introduced abnormality and futility. God cursed the ground because of Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:17).

in hope ²¹ that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

God, though he cursed the ground because of Adam’s sin, still gave it a hope of sharing in man’s redemption. Redeemed humanity will live in peace with God in a world transformed by His Spirit. This condition is an aspiration of all creation. Freedom not just from moral corruption, but the law of physical decay found in nature as well; the reign of dissolution and death. For Paul, the created physical universe is not to be a mere spectator of man’s triumphant glory and freedom, but is to share in it. When the children of God are finally revealed in glory, death will no longer have dominion over them and the material world will also be emancipated from this “last enemy.” (1 Corinthians 15:23-28).

“Paul means by this that the creation became corruptible. Why and for what reason? Because of you, O man! For because you have a body which has become mortal and subject to suffering, the earth too has received a curse and has brought forth thorns and thistles (see Genesis 3:18). ... The creation suffered badly because of you, and it became corruptible, but it has not been irreparably damaged. For it will become incorruptible once again for your sake. This is the meaning of ‘in hope.’” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 14]

22 We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now;

This compares the rebirth of nature to a woman's labor. It groans in hope and in expectation, but also in pain

23 and not only that, but we ourselves,

Not only material creation bears testimony to the Christian destiny, but Christians themselves do so by the hope that they have; a hope based on the gift of the Spirit which is already possessed.

who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,

The Spirit is compared with the first fruits of the harvest, which when offered to God, betokened the consecration of the entire harvest. "First fruits" was also often used in the sense of a "pledge or guarantee" of what was to come.

we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

The second testimony to Christian destiny is the hope that Christians themselves have of it; the first being the hope that material creation has. With the first fruits of the Spirit, the Christian looks forward to the full harvest of glory, the redemption of the body.

"The adoption as sons is the redemption of the whole body." [Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. A.D. 380), *Letter to Priests* 52]

Gospel - Matthew 13:1-23

Jesus is conducting His public ministry in Galilee. Between our reading of last week and today, Jesus has plucked ears of grain on the Sabbath, healed the man with the withered hand, and taught that His true relatives are those who are in the covenant with Him: "*Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*" Now He begins teaching in parables.

13:1 On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea.

Jesus prefers to teach in the outdoors. It may be that by this time, his followers have gotten to be so numerous that they won't all fit into an indoor setting.

2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore.

The crush of the crowd has gotten so intense that Jesus moves to a boat. Picture Jesus in a boat while the hillside within earshot is covered with people – sort of a natural amphitheater. Sitting is the normal posture of an oriental teacher.

³ And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow.

A sower is a farmer. The followers are simple folk; there are probably many who can identify with the rigors of farming. This parable is a simple description of the process of plowing in Palestine, the type of ground upon which the seed is sown, and of the usual results.

⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up.

It fell not on a road, but soil trampled in hard paths through the fields. The soil could not be plowed so the seed lay on the surface, where birds could get at it.

⁵ Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil.

The fields were sown throughout, even the edges and corners where the limestone base lies very near the surface. Much of Palestine is rocky, and the topsoil is often quite thin. The seed sprouts too soon, unprotected by deeper soil, unable to sink roots.

It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, ⁶ and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots.

In the blaze of the Palestinian sun, the sprouts burn up and shrivel.

⁷ Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it.

Wild thorns are the most common weed in the country. They are not cleared before plowing but turned under by the plow. The soil is sufficiently deep, but the weeds are powerful enough to choke the new sprouts.

⁸ But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. ⁹

When the seeds fall on deep, unencumbered soil, they bear abundantly, though not in equal measure. Oddly, the Greek text does not actually use the word for seed, *sperma*, anywhere in the parable.

Whoever has ears ought to hear.”

This is a common refrain in Matthew (11:15; 13:43). It constitutes an invitation to the listener to think reflectively on the human application of the figure. The audience must participate if the parable is to have its desired effect.

¹⁰ The disciples approached him and said, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

¹¹ 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.

The disciples' question intrudes upon Jesus' address to the crowd. If we take the setting in the opening verses seriously, the crowd too must hear Jesus' depressing answer. It is most likely that the sacred writer has inserted a theological consideration at this point. The Greek word *mysterion*, translated here as "mysteries" corresponds to the Latin word *sacramentum* which refers to the oath that binds a covenant. Those outside the covenant have not yet understood what is necessary to receive it.

12 To anyone who has,

Who is in the covenant.

more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

Those who are outside the covenant, those Jews who do not recognize the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, will lose their position as the chosen people who have received the revelation of God.

13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.'

The harshness of this saying reflects the ambiguity which is implicit in Hebrew and Aramaic which do not distinguish grammatically between purpose and result. The sacred writers could not conceive of a divine purpose which did not achieve its result nor of the result of a divine action that was not from a purpose. God is in ultimate control and will win out in the end.

14 Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: 'You shall indeed hear but not understand you shall indeed look but never see. 15 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 heart and be converted, and I heal them.'

This is the longest explicit quotation in Matthew. It is Isaiah 6:9-10 and follows the Septuagint exactly except for one word. It is God's positive intent to save the Jews if they will turn back to Him and His new covenant. He will work toward this intent right up to the end.

16 "But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. 17 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.

This beatitude expresses the privileged role of the disciples as eyewitnesses.

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom

This is the seed of the parable.

without understanding it,

This doesn't signify intellectual apprehension, but the full acceptance of the gospel.

and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart.

The evil one easily snatches away the message of God's reign in the person who is not prepared to receive it.

²⁰ The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. ²¹ 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.

This second class are opportunists who cannot meet the challenges of suffering or persecution.

²² 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.

This third class hears and accepts, but is distracted by secular interests.

²³ 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."

This final class hears, understands, and performs.