

**The 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year A: Using Nature to explain religious ideas.**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Isaiah 55:10-11: God's 'word' (or grace) works like rainwater!**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Romans 8:18-23: Creation / the Universe seems frustrated;**

**Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23: Parable of Sower shows our reaction to grace**

This week, I am writing only about the gospel, and making this homily generally practical. We often forget that the word 'broadcast' (used for radio & TV) originally came from farmers scattering or throwing - 'casting' - seed (or fishermen with nets) over a wide area. This old (if wasteful) farming system is the background to this gospel parable. To do the job quickly, the sower scattered the seed everywhere, with very different results. As you can read (and easily imagine), a first batch ended up by the side of the path – rock-hard earth, where birds simply ate it. A second lot fell on rocky, thin soil; this grew quickly in the heat, but having no deep roots, it withered equally quickly. A third batch fell among thorns; it managed to grow, but eventually was choked. The final batch fell into good soil, and produced varying amounts of wheat.

Parables used to be called "earthly stories with heavenly meanings": easy-to-remember stories with serious spiritual messages. Rabbis in Jesus' time often taught in this way. Some of Jesus' parables are fairly general - eg, a shepherd bringing back a lost sheep; a woman sweeping the house for a lost coin. With these, details do not matter – you get the general idea from an easy-to-picture sentence. But the parable of the sower is different: each of the four bits has an exact and corresponding meaning. This sort of parable is an *allegory*. Many scholars think that the explanation given in the gospel was probably added by the very early Church, rather than spoken by Jesus himself. (If he wanted to explain each point, why bother using the parable in the first place?)

The explanation relates to the "seed" being God's Word – to old-fashioned Catholics, this is called "Grace". The result that is achieved is what we would call "faith". The different sorts of soil represent the different personalities of those who are offered the "word" or "grace". It is fairly simple. The first type (hard ground, by the side of the path) is those who reject God's offer out-of-hand. The second type (shallow soil, quick growth) is those who unthinkingly accept everything; but their faith has no deep root; at the first sign of trouble, they fall away. The third type (among thorns) is more interesting: they do accept the word/grace; but they are also attracted by materialism / pleasure / other things. Over a period of time, these things 'choke' or kill-off the faith, and the people lose it. The fourth type (good soil) is the people who

accept the word/grace, and let it develop, so that they produce a “harvest” – meaning a religious faith that has practical effects in their lives. But they are not all the same: depending on personality and circumstances, some are far more productive than others – but at least, they all achieve something.

How does this parable relate to us? We all know people who reject any sort of religion out-of-hand, like the seed falling by the path. Next, what about the seed on thin, rocky soil? Jesus’ parables challenge us to think (perhaps uncomfortably) about our lives, and relationship with God. I do not think Jesus wanted to put people off faith, but he did not want it to be too easy, either – he warned us that we had to ‘carry the cross’ to follow him. I know this is not fashionable to write, but many seem to want “religion” to be like a restaurant meal – served on a plate, with no effort or work on their part. If we read the New Testament, or spiritual writers down to our own times, we know it is not like that. Those who want “easy” religion get instant, shallow growth, followed by a quick end, when problems arise, whether the fault be theirs, or others’.

I suggest that many reading this will come under the third and fourth sorts of “soil”. Lots of families will experience the faith being “choked” by modern life, especially in younger members. Jesus’ explanation mentions “worries of this world and lure of riches” – these days, you could add “peer-group pressure”, especially for teenagers at high school. While many of them get involved in good works of real spiritual worth, they often find themselves urged not to practise sacramental religion. But there are also adults for whom the faith has become a chore: they become involved in many things – professional and social – that gradually smother religious practice.

Finally, what about the “good soil”? For me, the most comforting thing is that Jesus accepts that we are not all the same. Some people achieve more than others, because of ability, commitment, and so on. But each one of us also has times in life when we achieve different amounts: we can go through good and bad patches – even in the same week! Yes, we are still committed to being “good soil”, but our quality can vary with different situations, moods, health and age. As noted above, the main thing is that at least we try: while we cannot always produce “a hundredfold”, thirtyfold is far better than nothing. Many of us who are getting older - with diminishing energy - find that very reassuring.

*Fr Jim Dunne.*