

Homily notes, live recording at Mass will expand and vary: 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time year A

Words, words, words, our basic way of communication. The sheer amount of words on our computers, smart phones, whatever device we use to communicate, we use words for almost all them. Words, one way or another, communication, matter so much in life.

At the start of this year, following Pope Francis, we celebrated a Sunday of the Word of God, and the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales designated this year as "***The God who speaks: The Year of the Word***", as it marked to 10th anniversary of *Verbum Domini* by Pope Benedict, and the 1600th anniversary of St Jerome's death.

St Jerome lived latterly in Bethlehem, and in a cave next to the grotto of the Nativity translated the scriptures into the Latin Vulgate. It was a great privilege when those of us on pilgrimage were able to celebrate Mass in his cave.

We never imagined in January that we would be in lockdown for a good part of the year; deprived of the sacraments, but always able to read and hear the word of God. The Ministry of the Word is a vital part of any sacrament. For the Christian, the guide in our life is Jesus. That is very important, because the clamour of voices coming at us is constant; it never ends, and He is our leader and guide.

Jesus is an expert teacher. Bible Alive today says Jesus parables are stories for all times. 'They reveal a mind of greater depth and clarity than ever before or ever since known in human history.' Jesus' parables give you just enough of its original setting to make you do your own thinking for your own time and situation.

Two themes are interwoven in the readings today: **the potential fruitfulness of the soil, and the power of the divine word.**

The 1st reading from Isaiah, writing at the time of exile in Babylon, (modern day Iraq) bring out both themes by way of a simile. The first pictures the inevitability of the process of growth brought about by rain;

(sun could be taken for granted in those parts) and the second applies this idea to the power of God's word. In this case the point of reference seems to be the promise uttered through his prophet of the certainty of God's deliverance of his people.

The Psalm is a traditional harvest song praising the Lord as the giver of fertility. Again we see that the giving of rain was regarded as the special mark of divine favour as ensuring continued fertility.

The 2nd reading has a reference to fruits, but this time the fruits of the Spirit, which characterise the life of the Christian believer.

For St Paul, as for the rest of the NT, harvest language is commonly used not for its own sake, but as an illustration of the power of God working in the unfruitful soil of the human heart. Here the point is made on the cosmic scale.

It is the whole created order which is meaningless and vain apart from Christ, and to all outward appearance nothing has been changed. But Paul is confident that through the life and death of Jesus *everything* has been changed: for those for whom that saving event has become a reality in their lives, though there is still much to wait for in the future (we still groan inwardly) yet already the first signs of new life can be discerned. The Sower parable appears in all three Synoptic gospels, (Matthew, Mark & Luke) & Matthew's naturally falls into three sections: the parable itself: addressed to great crowds and with the emphasis on the contrasting reception of the seed in different kinds of soil. Many of those who heard Jesus were unfruitful, just as were certain types of soil.

The second is concerned with the disciples alone. To explain the purpose of parables and the reason for the failure of so many to respond. Here a clear contrast is drawn between those within the church and those outside. The third section it seems as if all those addressed are within the Church, and warning given that even those who, as such, received the word do not necessarily bear fruit. Rocky ground and thorns can be found even within the Christian family, and it was to those tempted in this way that the final application of this parable was directed.

On the level of what Jesus experienced, questions arise about why he was rejected. How did a mission of such obvious goodness run up against so much hostility? Why was his preaching campaign so unsuccessful, leading to the biggest question of all –how did the crucifixion come about.

On the level of the time Matthew was writing, he was asking why have Christians been so despised and persecuted; a question sadly still very relevant for today. In our own times too there are questions which constantly recur. Why is there such a falling off in Church attendance, and so far as one can discern, in faith? What is it going to be like in the wake of the Corona virus in the years ahead?

The ideals of the kingdom are very noble and attractive, but why have they now such little influence in an increasingly secular, materialistic and promiscuous culture? What is it that sparks off the raging cries of criticism in the media after public statements of church leaders? How is it that some people become incandescent with rage at the very mention of church or religion?

People do think life will be very different in the future: Pope Francis and his change of Era.

Matthew's experience of virulent opposition from the scribes throws light on the vehement outbursts of today's post-Christian media pundits. The dam-burst of negative energy that we see today is what Matthew witnessed, and is exactly what Jesus experienced. The culpable rejection of grace sparks off the most illogical hatred – witness the crucifixion.

But the good news is that, in spite of obstacles and hostility, the kingdom grows and the harvest is as sure as God's grace. The promise is clearly written in the 1st Reading: 'the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.'

There may be hostile soil in hard hearts, shallow minds and a culture that chokes spirituality, but the disciple of Jesus Christ hears the good news, sees the exciting, good things that are happening, and understands.

What sort of soil are we?