

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
16th July 2023 - 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Isaiah 55:10-11. 2nd: Romans 8:18-23. Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23.

A parable is a story for all time. It is meant to give you just enough of its original setting to make you do your own thinking for your own time and situation. The gospel context here is the mounting opposition to the mission of Jesus. Opposition raises a barrage of questions.

Jesus tells a story from everyday experience which offers space to get behind the questions. As we today reflect on the parable of the Sower, we can distinguish three levels of time, each with its own set of questions.

1. 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? In spite of the signs and wonders he worked, why was his preaching campaign so unsuccessful; and the biggest question of all - why did it lead to crucifixion?
2. On the level of the time when Matthew was writing, the questions which occupied his mind were, why have Christians been so despised and persecuted? How could some believers have fallen away from such a precious faith? Why was it that so few of the Jewish Scribes recognised Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament texts?
3. In our own day too there are questions which constantly recur. Why is there such falling off in Church/Mass attendance? And in so far as one can discern, in faith in God?

The ideals of the kingdom are very noble and attractive, but why have they so little influence in an increasingly secular, materialistic and promiscuous culture? We believe that we have the supreme revelation of God in Jesus Christ, meant for the whole world. What is it that sparks off the raging cries of criticism on media, radio & TV after public statements of church leaders?

How is it that some people become incandescent with rage at the very mention of church or religion? Jesus offered the parable as an illustration of the differing reactions which are set off in the meeting of God's grace with human freedom.

Matthew takes up the story in the church of his experience. He reaches out to Jewish scribes by quoting from Isaiah on the difference between believers and unbelievers.

The believer, the disciple, is one who sees, hears and understands; and the more faith we have, the more it grows.

The unbeliever belongs to a nation whose heart has grown coarse. Coarse living renders the spiritual ear less sensitive and leaves the eye blind.

And while the believer increases in faith, the person who falls away from faith becomes extremely hostile.

Matthew's experience of virulent opposition throws light on the vehement outbursts of today's post-Christian pundits of the media & radio/TV. 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. That promise is clearly written in today's First 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 hears the good news, sees the exciting, good things that are happening, and understands.

Question: what sort of soil are we?