

Empty Pews
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Is 55:10-11; Ps 65:10-14; Mt 13:1-23)

“So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Is 55:10).

There are three Biblical ways that God’s Word “goes forth” to accomplish His work, in order to “return to him” in fullness and glory. The first is creation: God spoke, and it was efficaciously made. His word was not without effect; God said, *“Let there be light,”* and there was light...

In a second way, God’s Word, the “Logos” who is the second Divine Person, came to Mary by the angel Gabriel. She received Him in full readiness, joy, and obedience: *“Be it done unto me according to your word”* (Lk 1:38). *“And the Word become flesh and dwelt among us”* (Jn 1:14) in the Incarnation. Then, through the Redemption, through his Resurrection and Ascension, having accomplished His purpose and plan, the Incarnate Word returned to the Father.

The third way in which God’s Word goes forth is the one described by Jesus in the parable of the Sower: it is the preaching of the Gospel by the Church, part of which is occurring in this very Mass today. Yet there is a great difference in this third way. Not in terms of the way God’s Word proceeds forth – that is the same. But in terms of the way His Word accomplishes its effect. As Jesus teaches in the parable, it is often the case with preaching the Word, that it *does not* achieve the end for which it was sent!

In the first case, God’s word was immediately efficacious. God spoke, and it was so; nothing hindered His Word having its effect, and returning a glorious achievement. Likewise in the second case, God’s Word was fully effective, because in Mary, nothing prevented Him achieving His purpose. So pure and eager was Mary for God’s Word, that He literally became flesh in her. Mary is the utterly fruitful soil that corresponds perfectly to the heavenly Word.

Unfortunately, not so with us. Here, God’s word finds resistance, indifference, even opposition. In the preaching of the Gospel, God’s word often does not achieve its effect, or return Him any glory. Often, as Jesus says in the Parable of the Sower, the seed is scattered in vain, the word falls on deaf ears.

Or, as I can see today, the word falls on many empty pews. Today, as every Sunday, the farmer sows the seed looking for a harvest. Jesus is bringing his word to his people, in order to bring forth in their lives a harvest of justice, goodness, and salvation for the Father. But what good is it for that word to fall on an empty chair? What effect can the word have, when it does not even reach the soil?

Thankfully many are here, today and regularly, to hear God's word. Yet even then it doesn't always have its full effect. Jesus speaks about different situations, different kinds of people who even though they hear him, do not produce the fruits of the Kingdom. The Word never truly becomes flesh in their lives, the way Christ became flesh in the womb of Mary.

First he speaks of the seed that falls on the hard sidewalk. It does not enter, it is lost, stolen away by the birds. God's word goes "in one ear and out the other," so to speak. Jesus says it is the devil who is doing this. The Bible often speaks of people who are "hard of heart," or "stiff-necked." Such people are full of pride and sin, and refuse to bow to the will of God. They resist and oppose Him. These are people who will not allow God or the Church to "tell them what to do." They put up a wall, they are hard as a concrete sidewalk. You can preach all day long, but it's useless, they don't want to hear. And so there is no fruit, no salvation. This indifferent and rebellious attitude can easily creep into our hearts

Another type of person is described by Jesus as the "shallow soil." Here the seed quickly begins to sprout, but it does not last. Some people become eager and enthusiastic about their religion, and very involved in activities, but it does not last. Something comes up, things get difficult, and all of a sudden you don't see them anymore. What happened? Jesus said their faith is superficial. The word affected them only on the surface, not deep within their lives so that it became part of their bone and marrow. Many Christians run after different fads, and they hop around from place to place, chasing after the emotional experience. This is superficial, and it does not produce fruit. The farmer is very concerned when he sees the seed sprouting too soon. He knows that plant is not going to make it through the dry season. Faith must have deep and strong roots to get through the difficult times of the desert, to be able to endure the Cross.

In the third example, the seed falls among the thornbushes, which choke the plant so that it dies out. In this example, Jesus is talking about situations where there are too many other things going on in a person's life, too much competition for the faith, which loses its priority. These people are potentially good soil for God's word, but other things prevent the harvest which the Lord desires.

I think this is the main reason we have so many empty pews in the Church. It's not because all these people are "hard of heart" as in the first example. These missing parishioners have a lot to give, and even a desire to grow in the faith. But there are too many other priorities in their life, worldly activities and projects, and by the time Sunday rolls around they are just not able to make it. The faith is choked out, their spiritual lives are being suffocated. The plant is trying to grow, but it dies out.

And so it is, that in this third way alone God's Word goes forth from His mouth, but does not always achieve the purpose for which it was sent. The Church is proclaiming God's word – God's Word is going forth from His mouth – but often in vain, often to empty pews. The seed thus falls to the ground achieving nothing.

Nothing is lacking on the part of God's Word, which is efficacious enough to create a world out of nothing, which is powerful enough to bring about the Incarnation and Redemption. But much can be lacking in the soil destined to receive that Word, to the point of obstructing its vitality entirely. The work and effort then, is in preparing the soil to be fertile ground.

It is for another homily to explore what that spiritual work entails: the breaking up of the hardened earth with severe blows, the plowing and tilling of the field with a blade that cuts deep, the removal of rocks and stones, the meticulous weeding out of foreign plants, the mixing in of cartloads of manure, above all the creation of an irrigation system bringing abundant water...

For this homily, I will simply draw attention to the little prayer we say silently each time the Gospel is about to be proclaimed, when the priest traces the sign of the cross on the Gospel, and on his forehead, lips, and heart: "*May the words of the Gospel be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart.*"

It is not enough simply to hear the words with our ears. When explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus tells the disciples, "Let him who has ears *truly* hear!" (Mt 13:9). In order to truly hear, we must *understand*; the words of the Gospel must be "in our mind." Jesus severely criticizes those who "hear, but do not listen or understand" (Mt 13:14-15). When the angel Gabriel brought God's Word to her, she "considered in her mind" (Lk 1:29) and questioned the archangel in order to understand it: "How can this be?" (Lk 1:34).

Once she understood what was being asked (Lk 1:35), Mary immediately embraced the Word with the joyful obedience of her heart and will: "Be it done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Immediately she went to her cousin Elizabeth to proclaim with her lips the "great things the Almighty has done for me" (Lk 1:49).

The words of the Gospel must be [understood] in the mind, [embraced] in the heart, and [proclaimed] by the lips. This little prayer shows the pattern we must follow in order to become the fruitful soil for God's Word, able to bring forth a harvest of goodness and salvation that is *multiplied* 30, 60, or even 100-fold. Or, to use the preferred term of our Lady, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord!" (Lk 1:46).