

Synopsis of OT XV [A] (July 16) Homily on Matt 13:1-9 for a 1 minute homily

Introduction: Today's readings are about the transforming power of the word of God when read, preached and lived. They also warn us not to be disappointed at the absence of immediate results. We must take a positive and optimistic view of our missionary efforts as we keep on bearing witness to Christ's Gospel. The parable of the sower in today's Gospel challenges us to listen intently to God's Word, to be open to it and to shape our lives by its power. The parable reminds us that man's reception of God's Word is determined by the condition of his heart. (Add an anecdote).

Scripture lessons: In the first reading, Isaiah consoles the Jewish slaves in Babylon, assuring them that, like rain and snow which water the earth so that seeds may sprout and grow, God's word will accomplish its purpose, in this case by returning the exiles to their homes in peace as God promised. In the second reading, St. Paul reminds us that just as seeds must fall into the earth and die in order to produce abundant crop, the pain and sufferings God permits in our lives help our redemption. Paul wants us to wait for our eternal reward while we continue sowing the word of God diligently and suffering for the Lord, as he did. Today's Gospel teaches us that word of the Lord is the seed, our hearts and minds are the soil. The good spiritual yield in life depends on how much a person willingly accepts and responds to the word of the Lord. The yield arising from the positive response will be abundant beyond all imagination. The parable tells us to do our part by preparing fertile soil in our hearts for the word of God to germinate, grow and yield 30-, 60-, or 100-fold.

Life messages: We need to assess our use of the word of God. We have to read the word of God every day starting with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for the gifts of attentive reading and the ability and willingness to apply the message we receive to our daily lives. When we listen to the word of God as read and preached in the Church during the Holy Mass, we need to pay full attention to the message given by God using the priest as His instrument. We also have to ask God's special grace to remove all types of blocks, like laziness, anxiety, worries and the burden of unrepented sins, which prevent the word of God from influencing and transforming our lives. When we receive Jesus, the Word of God and the Source of the word of God, in Holy Communion we need ask him to transform our lives so that we may see Jesus in everyone (for all of them are our brothers and sisters in Him), and share with each of them Jesus' unconditional love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. 2) We need to keep our spiritual soil fertile and prepared for the word of God: We need to keep our hearts open to the word of God instead of closing it with pride, prejudice, fear or laziness. We have to remove from our hearts the weeds like evil habits, addictions and evil tendencies, hatred, jealousy, fear, and

greed. We should not allow the trials and tribulations of this world, the cares of this world, our ambitions, or our desires for worldly success and happiness to choke out the messages that God gives through His word.

OT XV [A] ((July 16)) Is 55:10-11; Rom 8:18-23; Mt 13:1-23

1: Sonora 64 and IR 8: Agricultural scientists like Dr. Norman Borlaug from the U.S., Dr. M. S. Swaminathan from India and Dr. Gurdev Khush from the Philippines proved to the world that seed has enormous power in it to save a nation from poverty. In the sixties, political scientists were predicting massive worldwide famine, acutely hitting countries like India with its 440 million people, and leaving millions to starve. There was, however, one scientist who saw things differently. His name was Dr. Norman Borlaug an agronomist from the U. S. who went to India with a seed called "Sonora 64," a wheat seed he developed at the *International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre* in Mexico. Borlaug convinced the Indian agricultural scientists and the government authorities to give it a try. They planted some Sonora 64 wheat in the Punjab region of India. The results were spectacular and pretty soon they were using it throughout the subcontinent. Later, they introduced a new variety of rice, called IR8, developed by Dr. Gurdev Khush at the *International Rice Research Institute* at Manila, Philippines, and it brought even better results: It increased rice production five-fold without using chemical fertilizers and ten-fold by using chemical fertilizers. These new seeds enabled India and other Asian countries to avert famine. Today with over 1.3 billion people, India actually produces a food surplus and has become a major rice exporter, shipping nearly 4.5 million tons in 2006. Here we see the power of a seed. Jesus tells us in today's Gospel about a far superior power of the word of God. [Fr. Phil Bloom (<http://www.homilies.net/e/E-08-07-13.asp>).]

2: Moso bamboo's surprise growth: The Moso (*Phyllostachys pubescens*) is a bamboo plant that grows mostly in China and the Far East. Moso bamboo is the largest of the cold-hardy bamboos, growing to a height of 75 feet with a diameter of eight inches. After the Moso is planted, no visible growth occurs for up to 50 days - even under ideal conditions! Then, as if by magic, it suddenly begins growing to its full height of 75 feet within 42 days. The Moso's rapid growth is due to the miles of roots (rhizomes) it has developed during those two months of getting ready. Jesus' parable of the sower invites us to be patient when we fail to achieve instant results from the preaching we do through our exemplary lives of bearing witness to Jesus and his Gospel.

3: Sowing imported seed to start a broom manufacturing industry: Outstanding among the heroic founders of the United States was Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). Printer, author, publisher, inventor, scientist, businessman,

thinker, statesman and diplomat, Franklin was a great blessing to the U.S and to humanity. One day he received a gift of a whisk-broom from India. He noticed a few seeds fastened to wisps of the broom. Franklin planted them. When the first crop came up he distributed the seeds among his friends and neighbors. Their crops flourished. Thus, Franklin was responsible for introducing broom-corn into the American colonies and starting the American broom manufacturing industry. Today's Gospel challenges us to do something like that, using the high yielding seeds of the word of God freely given to us. (Msgr. Arthur Tonne).

4: Sowing seeds by lives: Bruce Larson tells about a young African woman who came to the U.S. from Angola. Her name was Maria and she was always laughing. One day she went to a meeting on evangelism in her church where they were talking about pamphlets, missions, campaigns, and all the rest. At one point, someone turned to Maria and said, "What do they do in your Church in Angola, Maria?" "In my Church," said Maria, after a moment's thought, "we don't give pamphlets to people or have missions. We just send one or two Christian families to live in a village. And when people see what Christians are like, then they want to be Christians themselves." [*To Dance* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), p. 58]. The powerful word of God assimilated into lives is more powerful than its professional preaching.

Introduction: We all realize the sad truth that only a few professing Christians are really living productive spiritual lives. Hence, today's readings invite us to take a positive and optimistic view of the missionary efforts we make, and to continue to bear witness to Christ's Gospel through our transparent Christian lives, instead of turning cynical and becoming depressed. In the first reading, Isaiah, in the midst of a desert, can feel sure of the approach of spring for his people. Like Isaiah, all religious reformers confidently depend on the power of God's word. In the second reading, St. Paul reminds us that suffering is part of creation (seeds must fall into the earth and die in order to produce a fruitful life), and suffering and death produce redemption. Paul is expectantly waiting for his eternal reward, as he has sowed the word of God diligently and suffered for the Lord. Today's Gospel assures us that, since God is in charge, He will bring the harvest, and it will be abundant. We need not despair if that harvest is not immediately visible. The Church in every century has seen people reject Christ, as illustrated in the *parable of the sower*. The parable tells us to do our part by preparing fertile soil in our hearts for the word of God to yield 30-, 60- or 100-fold. We are to imitate the farmer who loses no sleep over a few seeds eaten by birds or a few suffocated seedlings.

The first reading (Isaiah 55:10-11): The prophecies collected in Isaiah, chapters 40-55, are known as the Book of Consolation. Written for the exiles who would return from Babylon to Judah, the chapters are meant to comfort the dispirited

people. There are promises of fertile land and restoration, water for the thirsty and secure defense against enemies as the result of Yahweh's power, and mercy. What Isaiah means is that, like rain and snow which water the earth so that seeds may sprout and grow, God's word will accomplish its purpose, in this case, to return the exiles to their homes in peace. Their return will be an everlasting memorial to the power of Yahweh's word. Thus, today's passage promises spiritual fertility. It implies that God will make the peoples' religious lives fruitful, as He has done for their land. And it could bespeak a promise that God will make fruitful the work of the prophet, whose job it is to proclaim God's word. In this reading and in today's Gospel, we are assured that God shares His abundance with us and that His plans will not be frustrated.

The second Reading (Romans 8:18-23): In this passage, descriptions of our spiritual distress are combined with descriptions of nature's distress. Following in Jesus' footsteps, Paul reminds the community in Rome of their obligation to trust God's word. But he does not use Isaiah's farming imagery. Instead, Paul states that the sin of Adam has brought corruption both to humankind and to nature. Genesis 3:14-19 describes nature turning against the convicted Adam and Eve. For Paul, then, what God is doing for us in Christ will redeem, not just mankind, but nature too. Paul uses agricultural imagery when he explains to his readers that they enjoy "the first fruits of the Spirit." Paul advises us to be patient in awaiting redemption and the kingdom.

Exegesis: A parable to boost morale: The word "parable" comes from the Greek word *parabole*, which means putting two things side by side in order to confront or compare them. And that is exactly how Jesus uses parables: He places a simile from life or nature against the abstract idea of the reign of God. Jesus' parable of the seed sown in various soil types was an attempt to boost the morale of his frustrated disciples. They were upset and discouraged because they realized that their master was facing opposition and hostility from the scribes, Pharisees and priests. The synagogues refused to admit him to preach. So Jesus had to go to beaches and hillsides. Some of the Pharisees were planning to trap him, and the common people were more interested in his ability to heal them than in his preaching. Using the parable of the sower in today's Gospel, Jesus assured his confused disciples that the "Good News" he preached would produce the intended effect in spite of opposition and controversy. Matthew may have included this parable in his Gospel, because his own Judeo-Christian community had experienced similar adverse reactions from their fellow-Jews, just as people today are frustrated in their attempt to live the Gospel in our consumerist, hedonist and agnostic society.

A parable of God's prodigality. Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 13, repeats seven parables Jesus taught on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The parable of the sower is the first. Some Bible scholars think that Jesus told the parable in verses 3-9 and that the early Church may have added the allegorical interpretation in verses 18-23. According to the traditional Palestinian farming practices, sowing often precedes plowing. We can assume that the sower intended to come back and plow the seeds into the soil. This parable is a story of God's prodigality, sowing seeds right and left, in abundant measure so that we constantly receive the word in our hearts from a merciful and generous sower. God is always scattering the seeds of His kingdom around us whether we deserve them or not, so that when the soil of our hearts is ready for the seed to germinate, the seed is already there. Even the tiniest seed of God's love can produce in us a harvest beyond our imagining. The Church is prodigal too, proclaiming the Gospel among primitive tribes in far-away jungles and among teenage gangs in urban ghettos, trusting in the power of the word of God which is described as a "sharp sword" (Is 49:2), "two-edged sword" (Heb 4: 12), and "fire and hammer" (Jer 23: 29). In other words, God's Word is powerful – and, as we know, no power exists that can frustrate it.

The yield depends on soil type: The good spiritual yield in life depends on how much a person willingly accepts and responds to the word of the Lord. In his parable of the sower, Jesus uses four different soil-types to represent four separate responses people can give to God's saving word. In fact, each one of us may display all four different types of soil at various time in our personal lives.

1) The soil along the path. This soil is too hard to absorb the seed. Soon the birds eat it up or passers-by trample it under foot. Jesus explains that this soil is like the person who hears the word of God without letting it sink in. The seed/word is then replaced by worldly concerns. This type of soil represents people whose hearts and/or minds are closed because of laziness, prejudice, fear, pride or immoral living.

2) The soil on flat circular pieces of limestone. This soil-type represents emotional people who are always looking for novelties but never take a permanent interest in anything. Jesus explains that this kind of person is at first impressed by the message but quickly loses interest because of the effort needed to keep the word alive. We have the example of a group of disciples who followed Jesus for a long time until the day he announced that he was the "bread of life." They found that teaching "too hard to accept" and just drifted away.

3) The soil filled with weeds: This soil represents people addicted to evil habits and evil tendencies and those whose hearts are filled with hatred, jealousy, fear and greed. They are interested only in acquiring money by any means and in enjoying

life in any way possible. Jesus explains that these people are filled with worldly interests that undermine them. The classic example is Judas who follows Jesus for a long time, but in the end, it seems, cannot let go of his worldly interests and so exchanges his Lord for earthly silver.

4) The good soil. This soil-type represents the people who hear the word of God and diligently keep it. They have open hearts filled with holiness and humility. They are eager to hear the word and ready to put it into practice. They are attentive to the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, the Gospel is filled with people who have accepted the Lord's message and whose lives have been changed. Jesus' words, in spite of obstacles and barriers, will produce the Kingdom. Although the seed may seem scattered at random, it will nevertheless produce amazing results: thirty-fold, sixty-fold – even a hundred-fold, an enormous yield with modern farming methods, let alone with those of first century Palestine.

Life messages: 1) A challenge for examination of conscience. The questions we need to ask ourselves are: Am I merely hearing God's word without understanding it? Does God's word meet with a hard heart in me? Am I too anxious about money, security, provision for retirement or old age? Is God's word taking root in me? Converting me? Transforming me? Enabling me to sacrifice? And what about the "fruits" that we are being invited to produce: justice and mercy, hospitality for the immigrant and those with AIDS, the dispossessed, the unborn, the single mother? By refusing to consider these things, we may be missing the healing that the Word of God can bring into our lives. The parable of the sower challenges us to see how deeply the word of God has taken root in our lives, how central God is to the very fabric of our day-to-day life. Jesus also invites his followers to embrace the Faith of the sower: to trust and believe that our simplest acts of kindness and forgiveness, our humblest offers of help to anyone in need may be the seeds that fall "on good soil" and yield an abundant harvest.

2) What kind of soil are we? How do we respond to the Word of God and to the various Acts of God in our lives? Do we allow the trials and tribulations of this world to overwhelm the tender seed growing within us? Do we pull back when people harass us because we are believers? Do we decide, because things are not working out the way we think they ought, that God doesn't care for us, or that He is powerless, weak and not to be heeded? Do we allow the cares of this world, our ambitions or our desires for success and happiness, to choke out the messages that God sends us through the various events of our daily lives and through the various people we encounter? How we respond to the Word of God is the key to how fruitful the Gospel is going to be in our lives. Unlike the situation in nature, we can, as it were, change the kind of soil that we are. God allows the seed to land on the hard paths, on the rocky ground and in the thickets of our lives in the hope that

in those places it will find a place to mature and bear fruit, that those things which impede growth will be removed and that the soil may be just a little deeper than it at first appears to be in those rocky places. Jesus challenges us in the parable of the sower to sow seeds of encouragement, joy and reconciliation regardless of the "soil" on which it is scattered, and to imitate the seed's total giving of self that becomes the harvest of Gospel justice and mercy.

JOKE OF THE WEEK: # 1) The costly parrot trained to sow the word of God: Four brothers left home for college and became successful doctors and lawyers. Some years later, they had a reunion. They chatted after having dinner together. They discussed the gifts they had been able to give their elderly mother who lived in a faraway city and decided to open their mother's thank you letter to each. The first said, "I had a big house built for Mama." The second said, "I had a hundred-thousand-dollar theater built in the house." The third said, "I had a Mercedes dealer deliver an SL600 to her." The fourth said, "You know how Mama loved reading the Bible, and you know she can't read anymore because she can't see very well? Well I met a preacher who told me about a parrot that can recite the entire Bible. It took twenty preachers 12 years to teach him. I had to pledge to contribute \$100,000 to the church, but it was worth it. Mama just has to name the chapter and verse and the parrot will recite it." The other brothers were impressed.

Then they solemnly opened the thank-you letters sent to them by their mom. Mama wrote: "Milton, the house you built is so huge. I live in only one room, but I have to clean the whole house. Thanks anyway." "Michael, you gave me an expensive theater with Dolby sound, it could hold 50 people, but all my friends are dead, I've lost my hearing and I'm nearly blind. I'll never use it. Thank you for the gesture just the same." "Marvin, I am too old to travel. I stay at home and I have my groceries delivered, so I never use the Mercedes. The thought was good. Thanks." "Dearest Gerald", she wrote to her fourth son. "You have the good sense to know what your mother likes. I cooked the chicken you sent. It was absolutely delicious!"