

This Sunday's Readings – the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The theme of today's readings is spiritual fertility.

The first reading is taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (Second Isaiah, written toward the end of the Babylonian Captivity). “Second” Isaiah takes on a very somber tone during this time just before the release of the Israelites from Babylon. The people of Israel have nothing, no nation, no army, and no temple. All they have is their faith in Yahweh. That is the point – all they really need is their faith in Yahweh. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column for *The Messenger* explains – “This anonymous prophet — responsible for chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah — was given the almost impossible task of redirecting Israel's faith. Jeremiah, his predecessor, had realized that many Jews really didn't have faith in Yahweh. Though they claimed to believe in God, they actually trusted in buildings and religious institutions. Jeremiah longed for the day when both would be destroyed, and the Chosen People would be forced to go one on one with Yahweh. The Babylonians fulfilled the prophet's wish in 586, BCE, destroying Jerusalem and carting off many of its residents to Babylon. Deutero-Isaiah eventually inherited Jeremiah's dream. Prophesying during the Exile, there were no buildings, no religious institutions. There was just Yahweh and Yahweh's people; a people who found it difficult to relate to a God who worked directly in their lives. Their most pressing problem was getting back to the Promised Land. And it's that issue which Deutero-Isaiah first addresses, promising his people that their return was imminent. But when anyone asked the prophet on what he based his certitude, he quickly responded, “We have Yahweh's word on it!” His whole ministry revolved around God's word. His people had no army to get themselves out of captivity. They only had the word of Yahweh”. Believe it or not, this reading is only one sentence long. That is because it is poetry with the very familiar “just as ... so shall” structure. In this case, the word of Yahweh is compared to water in the form of rain and snow. “Just as” water in the form of rain, fertilizes the earth so that crops can grow and flourish, “so shall” the word of God achieve its end, nourishing the people of Israel.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, we hear the very familiar Parable of the Sower. This very long gospel is divided into 3 sections. The first section is the Parable of the Sower. The second section explains the purpose of parables, and the third section describes Jesus' interpretation of this parable. This parable marks the beginning of Matthew's Third Discourse and also marks the middle of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew, Mark, and Luke's account of this parable are all basically the same. However, most scripture scholars believe that the second and third sections were later additions. This is based on the fact that the Gospel of Thomas, another sayings gospel which was recently discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, only recounts the first section, the parable itself. It is estimated the Gospel of Thomas was written around the same time as the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Thomas was considered a Gnostic Gospel. Gnosticism was one of the first heresies in the early Church. The Catholic Encyclopedia gives this definition of Gnosticism – “Gnosticism, which gets its name from the Greek word *gnosis* ("knowledge") was a religious movement beginning, possibly, before the time of Christ and extending into the first few centuries of the Christian era. Gnostics viewed

themselves as "those who know." Their heretical teachings varied from group to group and can't be pinned down with specificity, but common gnostic beliefs included these:

- Although Christ appeared to be human, his humanity was merely an illusion.
- Christ appeared to die, but did not really die. The Crucifixion was really a *crucifixion*.
- Christ was not truly God, the second Person of the Trinity. He was merely a created being who was the lowest of the *aeons*, a group of semi-divine beings between God and man. Each lower *aeon* was given power by a higher *aeon*. Christ, the *aeon* furthest removed from God, created the world because God was too pure to dirty himself with matter.
- Matter is evil, so one can do anything one wants with one's body, including killing it to release the soul from its imprisonment.
- The God of the Old Testament is evil, as evidenced by the fact that he created the material universe. He is not the same as the God of the New Testament, who is the God of Love, as Jesus and his apostles taught (1 John 4:8, 16).
- People are saved by acquiring secret knowledge (*gnosis*), which is imparted only to the initiated”.

Note the first line of the Gospel of Thomas – “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded”. Like the first reading, the word of God is here compared to the seed that is sown on different types of soil. It was common farming practice at the time of Christ that seed was sown on an empty field and then the field was plowed. That makes it easier to understand how some seed wound up on barren paths and some in good, fertile soil. The meaning is quite simple – Jesus spreads the Word of the Kingdom of God to all people. How that Word is received depends on the individual. Some reject it outright, some initially accept it but then reject it, and some accept it and are nourished by it. As Jesus said – “But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit”. Just as in the first reading, all that really matters is our faith in God, and not our dependence on material things.

John J. Pilch, in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today’s Gospel reading – “Parables paint culture-based scenarios. Yet every one in the ancient world knew that the parable teller intended the scenario to refer to something more or something other than was described.

THE SOWER

In today’s parable, the first question is, who is the sower? In the ancient world, sowing preceded plowing. Still, the manner of sowing described in this parable is sloppy and wasteful. If the sower is a landowner, the peasant audience would despise his waste of precious seed. If the sower is a tenant farmer or a day laborer, the peasants would sympathize with his careful sowing which ends up wasting seed anyway because conditions are so difficult. The impossibly extravagant harvest gives a clue to the identity of the sower. On average, one might expect a four- or five-fold return on sowing.

Thirty-, sixty-, and a hundredfold boggle the imagination. If a wasteful landowner realized such a profit, Jesus' parable is hardly good news to the peasants who made up 95 percent of his audience. But if the sower were a peasant, then the good news is that the crop will satisfy the landowner, provide seed for next year's sowing, pay all taxes, and still leave enough for the peasant to feed the family. Moreover, since it is clearly God and not human effort that produces this humongous harvest, the "something other" or "something more" that the parable intends is now very clear. The scenario describes sowing and farming, but it really points to a loving and provident God who looks after needy peasants.

INGROUPS AND CONFRONTATION

The parable reveals yet another dimension of peasant life in the first century. Jesus tells his disciples that parables are "ingroup" or "insider" language (see vv. 10-16). Normally, one's ingroup consisted of one's household (including servants and slaves), extended family, and friends. All others, even in the same village, were the outgroup. Still, the shape of both groups was rather fluid and changed often. For instance, if a village came under attack from outsiders, the entire village banded together as a new ingroup. Natives of the same village or quarter of a city who might be outgroup to each other at home become ingroup to each other when they find themselves in a remote location. That Jesus of Nazareth had a house in Capernaum (Mark 2:1), and that the first people from Capernaum whom he called to follow him responded so readily indicates the extent of Jesus' ingroup network at that place (Matt 4:18-22 and parallels). All this discussion about ingroups and insider language is very jarring to modern believers who tend to hold Luke's idyllic view of the early followers of Jesus as living in loving harmony (Acts 2:42) and being constantly under attack by enemies. Hostility permeated this culture and colored everyone's behavior. The difference between Americans and their Mediterranean ancestors in the faith is that Americans generally seek to avoid face-to-face confrontation. Hostility and competition takes place behind the scenes, out of sight. In the final verses (18-23) of this reading, Matthew interprets Jesus' parable by identifying the seed as "the word of the kingdom" and exhorting people to hear, understand, and act upon the word. The challenge is quite familiar to American believers. It's not enough to "talk the talk," one must also "walk the walk."

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