

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:10-11
<i>Response</i>	The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 65:10, 11, 12-13, 14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:18-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower. All who come to him will have life
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 13:1-23

The 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A takes us into the third great discourse in the Gospel of Matthew. The first discourse of Jesus was the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, the second discourse was the missionary discourse in Matthew 10, and now we move into the third great teaching discourse of Jesus, which is the parables discourse, which consist primarily of Matthew 13. So what we find in Matthew 13 is a cluster of many of Jesus's most famous parables, and in the lectionary, what the Church does is spends three Sundays in Ordinary Time taking us slowly through this discourse on the parables. Already that should tell you that the parables of Jesus are important, and that if we are going to understand his message we need to be able to understand the parables. So the Gospel for this Sunday is a long Gospel. It is the first 23 verses of Matthew 23, so what I would like to do is walk through it in order, but stop and pause at certain points and explain what's going on, rather than read the whole Gospel and come back to the beginning. So let's begin, the first section of the Gospel just sets the stage for what Jesus is going to do throughout the rest of the chapter, and also gives us the first, and in some ways the most famous, of his parables, which is the parable of the sower. So let's do those first few verses. In Matthew 13:1 and following we read:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the

whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables...¹

Alright, pause there. The Greek word there for parable is *parabolē*, so this is a loan word from Greek into English. It's a translation of the Hebrew word *mashal*, which literally means a riddle or a proverb. So the idea of Jesus teaching in parables here, in a Jewish context, isn't just comparison stories — although that's the primary meaning of the Greek word. The Greek word does mean to compare two things, to throw them together literally, but it's based on a Hebrew word that also has the connotation of a proverb or a riddle. So one of the first things I want to stress here about the parables is that many of Jesus' parables aren't just stories comparing two things one to another, they also are riddles. So whenever you read the parables of Jesus you want to ask yourself is there something unusual going on in this comparison, is there something unusual in the story, or as I like to tell my students, "look for the twist." There is almost always a twist in Jesus' parables, something unexpected. And if you can figure out what the twist is, then you are going to get at the heart of the parable, you are going to find the meaning of the riddle, you will unlock the meaning of the riddle. So he's teaching them many things in parables and this first parable here is the parable of the sower. So it says this:

"A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."

Okay, let's pause there for just a moment. Now if you are a cradle Catholic or if you have been going to Mass for several years regularly, then you're going to be

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

familiar with this story, the story of the sower who goes out to sow seed and the seed falls on different kinds of ground. However, I kind of want to just back up and try to imagine, what would a first century Jew have thought about this parable and how would they have reacted to it? Because a lot of times what happens is we become so familiar with the story of the parable that we often miss the twist, we often miss the unexpected nature of what Jesus is describing here. So let me try to put you in their shoes and imagine it for just a second. So let's start back at the beginning of parable. Jesus says: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path." Now pause there, that is the first unexpected element to this parable, because any first century Jew would've known that if you're going to go and get seed — which was expensive — and you are going to plant it in your field or in your garden and that's your livelihood, you'd better take good care that none of the seed gets lost. And so what is being described here is a sower who is careless in his sowing of seed.

Think about it. Even if you plant a garden and you go out and buy some seeds at Lowes, Home Depot, or the garden center, and you bring them home, what are you going to do? You're going to put each seed in the furrows, you are going to put them in the soil in just the right spot so that they can grow. You are not going to, on the way home from the store, drop some seed in the driveway. What is going to happen to that seed if you do? It's not going to take root and it'll be either eaten by birds or it will be crushed in the pathway. So already there's a twist to this parable. Namely this, this sower doesn't know what he's doing. He is seemingly careless with the seed, he drops some on the path. So let's keep going:

Other seeds fell on rocky ground

Okay, once again, the sower honestly has no idea what he is doing. This guy is a terrible farmer. He is not only dropping seed in the highway, on the street, he is also dropping it in the rocky ground, where nothing is going to grow. And sure enough, although there's a little bit of soil there, there is not enough for it to last so it sprouts up quickly but it withers away as well very quickly. And then finally, in the next images, it says that other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Yet again this guy is the worst farmer in the universe. You don't plant seeds in the midst of thorns, they will do to the seeds exactly what weeds will do to your garden. So just to take a real quick personal example, I planted a garden

in my backyard this year. We went away for a long vacation and I noticed some weeds were growing in the garden before we left, but I didn't have time to take care of them. Before we left, I had planted squash plants and the squash was flourishing. It was green. They were giant plants, but by the time we got back from vacation the weeds had grown up and had completely not just grown around the other plants, but had choked them and killed them. So like four or five of the squash plants were completely dead, because the weeds had gone in and choked them at the roots.

Why did this happen? Because I'm a terrible gardener, and the same thing is true of the sower here. This guy does not know what he's doing or at least he apparently doesn't know what he's doing, because he's so careless and gratuitous with all of these seed. So first century Jews are going to wonder "who is this crazy sower and what does this have to do with the kingdom of God?" Then finally he gets it right, some of the seed falls on good soil and on that good soil it brings forth grain, that you would make wheat, that you would make bread with. But notice how much it brings forth, sixtyfold, thirtyfold, and a hundredfold. Okay, now pause there for a moment. As a number of scholars have argued here, in an ordinary harvest in the first century A.D., seven-and-a-half-fold would be like an average harvest, and tenfold would be a good harvest. So what is Jesus describing here, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold!? This is almost miraculous. This is a super abundant harvest. And again that's unexpected because this sower doesn't seem to know what he is doing. Yet when he gets it in the good soil, it's like a miraculous harvest, super abundant grain, superabundant wheat. And how does Jesus end?

He who has ears, let him hear.

That alone should tell you right there that this is a puzzle, this is a riddle. He's calling you to try to grasp the deeper meaning of the parable. It is not to going to be obvious. You have to have ears. Your ears have to be open to what he's trying to say. Now that's the end of the parable. Now if you keep going in the Gospel reading, you'll see that the disciples themselves are puzzled by this manner of teaching. Look at how they respond — we are going to leave the meaning of the parable for just a minute. The Gospel keeps going:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

Now pause there. If I asked you that question, why did Jesus teach in parables? What would you say? What's the answer to the question? I don't know about you, but most people that I've met, and I know of my own learning over the years, most people assume or will say that Jesus taught in parables so that simple, ordinary people could understand it. In other words, that he gave these common stories from ordinary life so that even the simplest person could understand it, and so that his teaching would be as clear as possible. He is not a philosopher, he is not using all this highfalutin language. And that is partially. The parables are drawn from everyday life. They are drawn from the fields and the farms and fishing, so they are drawn from ordinary life. But, they are not simple stories that would be clear and obvious to everyone. If you actually look at Jesus' answers the apostles, it almost seems like he is saying the precise opposite. Look at what he says there:

Why do you speak to them in parables? And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: 'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.'

Okay, pause there for a second. What did Jesus just say? He said that the reason he speaks in parables is precisely in order to conceal the secrets of the Kingdom from those who are hard of heart, blind of sight, and deaf of hearing. So the parables have a kind of paradoxical function. They both reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom to the disciples and conceal the Kingdom to those whose hearts are hardened against Jesus. So the parables are not nice little stories that everybody can understand. They are mysteries. They are riddles that you need the grace of an open mind, open heart, and open ear to be able to grasp. In other words, the

parables would've been confusing to people and not just simple teachings that anyone can understand. And that is why he says to the disciples, “to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom.” And the Greek word there for secrets is *mystēria*, we get the word mystery from that. So yet again, just like last Sunday in Ordinary Time, where Jesus talked about the mystery of the Son and the mystery of the Father, now he's talking about the mystery of the Kingdom. This is a supernatural mystery, you can't just figure it out because you are really smart. It has to be revealed to you through the grace of God.

So the parables conceal it from those who are hard of heart, and here he is quoting this chapter from Isaiah, Isaiah 6 14-15. It was basically a prophecy of Isaiah, who was speaking in the eighth century B.C., to the Israelites at a time when they were very corrupt and they were very sinful. And guess what Isaiah would do? When he wanted to condemn them for their hard-heartedness and sinfulness, he would use parables, he would use allegories, like in Isaiah 5-6, because the parable was — I don't want to say a safe way — a kind of safe way to condemn your audience without explicitly just condemning them. It made them think about their own state of hardheartedness. So Jesus takes the language of Isaiah and he says “I speak in parables because of what Isaiah said. Because just like Isaiah was speaking to a sinful people whose hearts were hardened, so now those who are rejecting me in our time are fulfilling that prophecy of Isaiah.” Whereas the disciples were given the grace to understand, that's what he says in the next verses, verse 16 and following:

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

So the disciples have been given a special grace to hear and to understand, but as you all know from the Gospels, that doesn't mean they always get it, and so they need a little help. And so what Jesus does now is he not only gives them the parable, the riddle, he also gives them the explanation. He breaks it down for them and tells them what the meaning of this riddle is. So in verse 18 and following the Gospel reading ends with the explanation, and he says this:

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Alright, now we got the explanation, now he's given them basically the key to unlocking this riddle. So what Jesus is laying out here is four kinds of soil, or four kinds of responses to the word of the Kingdom. So let's just walk through those again briefly. So first and foremost, if the seed is the word of the Kingdom, then obviously who is the sower here? Jesus himself, Jesus is the sower, because he is the one that is bringing the word of the King. Now what does that tell you though? What is kind of the surprising result of that? Well it is that Jesus appears to be kind of careless with the word of the Kingdom. In other words, he's like a farmer who goes to the garden center, buys a bunch of seed, and is just flinging it everywhere, seemingly indiscriminately because he is gratuitous in his proclamation of the Kingdom. He doesn't just bring the Kingdom to those who are going to respond, hear it and bear fruit, he brings it to everyone. That is the first second.

The second point is that there are these different kinds of soil. So the first one is the seed sown on the path. This is like dropping your tomato seeds for your garden in your driveway, where everybody walks. What's going to happen to those seeds? Well, the birds are going to come, they are going to snatch the seed away, and eat it. So what do the birds represent? Jesus says that the birds represent the devil, they represent the evil one, and that that seed that falls on the path is those who hear the word but they don't understand it, they hear the parables but it makes no impact on them. It is like the seed is being given to them but it isn't planted in their hearts. It just strikes the surface of them and then it falls away because the devil snatches it away. So this is basically a kind of allegorical description of what he was talking about earlier, the people whose hearts and eyes and ears are dulled and

closed and unwilling to hear the Gospel. The seed is given to them but it doesn't take any root.

The second kind of soil is the rocky ground, and this is a different kind of person. This is the person who hears the word of the kingdom and at first they're all excited, they accept it with joy. Let's say they go on a weekend retreat, or they go to a youth conference and they have a real conversion. They hear the message of the Gospel, they repent, they want to turn away from their previous life, they give their lives to Christ, for example. They become a disciple, they become a believer, and then they begin to walk the path of discipleship. And what happens? When persecution or suffering arises on account of the word, let's say maybe they start to lose their friends that they had from the former life, or they experience suffering, hardship, after they become a disciple, it says immediately they fall away. So the image there is like a seed being planted in rocky soil. It can get started in that rocky soil. In fact it might even start more quickly in that shallow soil. The roots pop out, the sun warms the soil, and the seed sprouts and makes a plant. But the problem is there's no depth of soil, so as soon as it starts to get really hot, what happens to the plant? It withers because the roots don't go deep enough into the soil for it to continue to live.

And the same thing Jesus is describing here. These are people who would've heard Jesus preach, got excited about him, they would've accepted him as Messiah, but they didn't endure, they didn't persevere in the life of discipleship and then they fall away. In the Catholic Church, I should note here, we can tie this to the level of people who leave the Church, the massive number of people who leave the Church after Confirmation, or even after going through our RCIA, who receive the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation, and then within a few months or within a few years are not going to Mass anymore because they have fallen away from the faith. I know there are all kinds of different reasons for that, but Jesus experiences that as well in his own public ministry. There were people who would accept the Gospel at first but they don't stick with it, they don't endure, because of tribulation or even of persecution or rejection. That is the second kind of soil.

The third kind of soil is the thorns, the seed that's thrown among thorns. Now in this case, there's plenty enough soil for the seed to grow, but the plant that starts to grow is surrounded by thorns, it is surrounded by other plants that are going to

choke it out. And what do those thorns represent? Well Jesus says they are two things: the cares of the world and delight in riches. Now notice that. He doesn't say mortal sins, he doesn't say adultery, fornication, murder, blasphemy, he doesn't say anything like that. That is not what he is talking about. The thorns are those who receive the word and just the anxiety and the cares of life, just the duties and the difficulties of life, choke the word. Or it is the pursuit of riches, so that the person spends all of their time pursuing money, pursuing wealth, those two things, anxiety about worldly things and the pursuit of wealth, are like spiritual thorns to the seed. They will surround it, they will go after the roots and then they will choke out the life of it. So you might have a plant, and it might even be alive, but it is not going to bear any fruit. It is like my squash plants. They are all still alive but there is not a fruit on any one of them, because the weeds surrounded them and sucked all the nutrients out from their roots, they choked them. They didn't quite kill them, but they choked them.

So what Jesus is describing there is people who might've heard his Gospel, might have started to follow him, but they are just so caught up with their daily life that they don't pray, they don't fast, they don't give alms, they don't live the life of discipleship. And so eventually what happens? They don't bear any fruit. They might stay alive, but there is not going to be any fruit for the sake of the Kingdom. That's the danger of wealth and the danger of anxiety, which Jesus is always reminding his disciples, over and over again, "don't be anxious about tomorrow, tomorrow is got enough people for itself. Seek first the kingdom. Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." These are all from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. It is very important theme for Jesus...the teaching on freedom from anxiety and detachment from wealth.

Then finally, the good soil, the last soil, what is the good soil? Well notice what Jesus says, "the good soil is he who hears the word and **understands it.**" Why do I emphasize that? Well because here he is talking about not just the heart, but the mind as well. That we want to understand the word, we want to grow in our knowledge of the word, in our wisdom. He says that "whoever hears the word and understands it," these are like good soil, when the roots can go deep enough not just for the plant to live, but to actually bear fruit, and not just to bear fruit, but to bear a lot of fruit, abundant fruit. Not just tenfold, but sixtyfold, thirtyfold, and even a hundredfold — which would basically be a miraculous bearing of fruit. So

what does the fruit represent? Well if the seed is the Kingdom, then the fruit is going to be the grace of the Kingdom, bringing others to conversion, bringing others to discipleship. It might be miraculous signs and wonders. It might be the preaching and the teaching of the good news to others. There is all kinds of manifestation of the fruit, bringing other people to repentance and teaching them to live a life of discipleship. That is the image of the good soil. That's what the good soil does, it becomes a place for the word to bear fruit.

And if you want an example of this, just look at the lives of the saints. Pick any major, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Dominic — in particular look at the founders of religious orders — St. Benedict. How much fruit has the holiness of a St. Benedict produced in the life of the Church? Well 1500 years later we still have Benedictine monasteries, we still have disciples of Jesus, believers in Christ, all around the world giving themselves to a life of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, poverty, chastity, and obedience. That one man, his commitment to the word and his allowing the word to be rooted in his soul and in his heart, has borne fruit for 1500 years. Countless thousands and thousands of souls — tens of thousands — have been touched. The same thing is true about St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. How many conversions have been brought about through the Society of Jesus? We can't even begin to count that. It doesn't seem possible for that kind of fruit to come from one man, a sinner, like Ignatius of Loyola, but it did. Why? Because he had good soil, because he became good soil for the word of Christ and for the word of God. Think about even a Mother Teresa or even St. John Paul II. I am thinking about the number of vocations to the priesthood — especially diocesan priesthood — that are taking place since the death of St. John Paul II. How many have said “it is through John Paul II that I received my vocation to the priesthood.” So that's again the image of seed bearing fruit in the life of a saint. That is what Jesus is talking about in the parable of the sower.

So this parable is a great parable for a kind of examination of conscience, because we always want to ask ourselves, “well what kind of soil am I? How am I responding to the word of the Kingdom?” Obviously there is always the temptation to think “I am the good soil,” but if we are honest with ourselves, I think we can see each one of those soils at different points in our lives. We can become like each of those soils and we need to always revisit the good news and examine ourselves to say “how am I allowing the seed of the word of God to be planted in my heart and to bear

fruit? Or am I allowing anxiety or the pursuit of wealth to choke? Or am I falling away because of suffering or because of persecution? Or have I just been like the first soil? Have I just been hardhearted and not listened at all?" Any one of those can describe any of us, because those have been the way people respond to the Gospel since Jesus first preached it. Alright, so that is the parable of the sower. There is a lot going on there as you can see.

What about the other readings for Mass? Well if you go back to Isaiah 55:10-11, the first reading for the day is obviously chosen because it uses the same image that Jesus does in the parable of the sower. Where did he get this idea of comparing the word of God to a seed? Well, it's from the Old Testament — like everything else pretty much. So in Isaiah 55:10 it says this:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

So you see the Lord there in Isaiah 55 comparing his word to the water that goes down to the earth that gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater. So in other words, just like the water from heaven is not unfruitful, so too the word of God is going to give seed to the sower and bread to the eater. And what does Jesus parable describe there? A harvest of wheat. And what do you make with wheat? You make bread with wheat. So you can even see this as a kind of anticipation of the Eucharistic imagery in the New Testament, that the word of Christ is not just going to come to us in Scripture, but come to us in a special way, sacramentally, in the Eucharist, the bread of life. When the priest says the words "this is my body... this is my blood", that word is efficacious, it's powerful, it does what it says, so that God's word is not in vain and the seed that he plants does bear fruit.

And in this case, the Responsorial Psalm for the day is Psalm 65, and again it continues the theme of the fruitfulness of the earth by just telling us that the seed

that falls on good ground is going to yield a fruitful harvest. There is a beautiful passage there in those verses, let's just listen for a second:

Thou visitest the earth and waterest it,
thou greatly enrichest it;
the river of God is full of water;
thou providest their grain,
for so thou hast prepared it.
Thou waterest its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

Thou crownest the year with thy bounty;
the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness.
The pastures of the wilderness drip,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Now that might seem a little melodramatic to those of us who for our whole lives getting food means just going to store and buying it, but for a first century Jewish audience that was an agricultural society, the rain from heaven was an occasion for joy, because it meant that you were going to be able to eat, you were going to be able to feed your family. And the fields bringing forth fruit was a time of great joy. The harvest meant that you could live for another year, live through the winter, live through the summer, and all of that they recognized as coming from God.

Okay, in closing then, what can we take away from the parable of the sower? I'd like to end with one last reflection from the living tradition of the Church as expressed by the Catechism. So the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in paragraph 2705, mentions the parable of the sower in a very specific context. This is in part four of the Catechism where it is going through the three kinds of prayer. Vocal prayer, using words like the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be; Meditation, which would be pondering, using the mind to contemplate, to reflect

on the mysteries of faith; and then Contemplative Prayer, encountering Christ in a silent gaze of love, as the Catechism calls it. In the section on Meditation, in paragraph 2705, the Catechism defines meditation as using our minds to seek to understand the faith, to understand the why and the how of Christianity. And this is what the Catechism says:

Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower.

That is very fastening. So what is the Catechism saying there? Well it's not meditation in like a Buddhist or Eastern sense, but in a Catholic sense, in a Christian sense. Meditation, especially pondering the Scripture, meditating on the word of God, lectio divina (divine reading), prayerfully reading the Bible, and what the Catechism says there is that if we don't develop the desire to meditate on Scripture regularly as a regular part of our prayer life, we are going to become like one of the first three kinds of soil. We are either going to be like the seed that falls on the path, where our hearts will be hardened; we will be like the seed that's among the rocky soil, where it's rooted for a little while but it doesn't grow, the sun scorches it and it doesn't bear any fruit; or we will be like the seed among the thorns, where the cares and riches of life choke the seed so it doesn't bear any fruit. So if you are looking at yourself and you are like "man, I am like one of those first kinds of soil." If you're identifying with that, then what is Catechism do? It tells us that you need to meditate more. You need to take time not just to pray vocal prayer, but to take time to ponder the word of God, to reflect on Scripture every day. Fifteen minutes a day in the morning, thirty minutes a day in the morning, take time to read the word of God every day and meditate on, just ponder, the words. Take a passage of Scripture, take the reading for the day, and reflect on it. Because Jesus says that "the good soil is the one who hears the word and understands it." And you are never going to understand it unless you meditate, unless you ponder that word, and make it a part of your life, and take it not just into your ears, but into your hearts as well.