

Psalm 94

O Lord, God of vengeance,
O God of vengeance, shine forth!
Rise up, O judge of the earth;
repay to the proud what they deserve!
O Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?
They pour out their arrogant words;
all the evildoers boast.
They crush your people, O Lord,
and afflict your heritage.
They kill the widow and the sojourner,
and murder the fatherless;
and they say, "The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive."

Understand, O dumbest of the people!
Fools, when will you be wise?
He who planted the ear, does he not hear?
He who formed the eye, does he not see?
He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke?
He who teaches man knowledge—
the Lord—knows the thoughts of man,
that they are but a breath.

Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord,
and whom you teach out of your law,
to give him rest from days of trouble,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.
For the Lord will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage;
for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.

Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who stands up for me against evildoers?
If the Lord had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.
When I thought, "My foot slips,"
your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up.
When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.
Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who frame injustice by statute?
They band together against the life of the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.

But the Lord has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.
He will bring back on them their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the Lord our God will wipe them out.

Matthew 13: 1-23

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 down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "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 did not have 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 among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."

Then the disciples came and said to him, "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 the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one 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. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

"You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."

For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.'

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

"Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one 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 the one who hears the word, but the cares of the

world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one 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.”

Sermon

A sower went out to sow

It is easy to let ourselves be inundated by images on a daily basis. Social media takes us to any place in the world, within seconds.

While we encounter images and experience the speed with which they come to us, I wonder: where does such an emphasis on the use of our vision leave our receptiveness to a purely oral message? Are we willing and able to concentrate fully on what is spoken to us in our interaction with people, face to face? Recently, someone told me he was glad he had been made aware by me of a particular community service. He said, ‘I am glad you told me. Though I know a poster promoting this service is displayed at the health centre, I would not have made contact with the service.’ It illustrates the importance of a personal encounter during which people speak and listen to each other.

Hearing is the key in both our readings.

Hearing the One whom we worship. Hearing the One we believe in:

Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17)

Most of us are familiar with the parable of the sower. It tells of seed being sown, falling in different kinds of soil; four different kinds of soil and then tells what consequently happens to the seed. The seed that does fall along the path, which presumably is the path that goes along the field in which it is meant to fall and grow, gets eaten by the birds. Seed that falls on the rocky ground cannot develop and withers. Another part of the seed falls amongst thorns and gets choked. But the fourth part falls on the good ground and bears much fruit. It grows; becomes more: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Then Jesus finishes the parable by saying,

“He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:9)

What follows then is a private conversation between Jesus and His disciples, when they ask Him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

What makes the disciples ask Jesus this question? Was it a new thing for them, parables? Certainly not. The disciples were familiar with teaching through parables. Rabbis used parables to teach the Torah; the Law of God. So, the fact that Jesus communicates in parables is not what triggers the question. Their question is:

“Why do you speak to *them* in parables?” in the sense of, “why can You not be more specific to them, clearer, more direct?” What needs to be heard in the disciples’ question is the separation between themselves and the crowd. If you bear that in mind, Jesus’ answer makes more sense when He says,

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given (Matthew 13:11)

There is a difference in terms of level of understanding. The disciples are spiritually further advanced than the crowd. They are with Jesus and are taught by Him; they know what the crowd doesn't know, which is that the Kingdom of God has come *in* Jesus. The sower in the parable represents both Jesus and the seed that is sown. For He Himself is the Kingdom of God. Jesus sows Himself and from there the Kingdom of God unfolds.

But the unfolding is of course closely related to how Jesus is received. Is the sown seed being absorbed in the ground where it falls...the ground of course being the....well, what do you think...?

Of what quality is the soil of the receiving hearts? Are they like the path where the seed is taken away or like the rocky ground, where it comes up as there is a little soil there, but then withers as soon as the sun comes up. Does it end up on the ground with good soil but amongst the thorns, the things in life that matter more than God and so choke the seed preventing it from growing?

If we grasp that the soil in the parable represents the soil of one's own heart, the following words of Jesus may be understood,

For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. (Matthew 13:12)

Thinking of the four kinds of ground Jesus speaks about, you could say 75% falls on ground that does not produce anything. Only 25% bears fruit. Only to that little percentage in Jesus' parable, more will be given and it will have an abundance.

What is received by the majority on the path, on the rocky ground and between the thistles, that will be taken away, just as it happens in the parable.

Jesus explains to His disciples that there are people who see without really seeing and hear without really hearing.

That was so then, and so it is now.

It is one thing to see what meets the eye. It is another thing to see what lies behind what meets the eye. It is one thing to hear. It is another thing to hear and absorb what is heard, not just for a while, but permanently.

The Word of God's Kingdom that is sown by Christ does not seem to get through: an overwhelming majority does not absorb it. However, the minority that does, from there a rich harvest will come,

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one 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." (Matthew 13:23)

That is God's own promise. He will go *His* way with a remnant for He will not let go what His own Hand began. Yet, it is our responsibility to keep the soil healthy.