

15TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR, A, 2020

'Jesus left the house...'. Chapter 13 of Matthew marks something of a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Up until now, while he has taught the crowds outside before, there was a certain tendency for Jesus to teach in the synagogue. 'The house' is perhaps symbolic of this. But now he gets into a boat by the lakeside (symbolising the barque of St Peter, the Church, according to St Hilary of Poitiers) and teaches the great crowds of people outside. Why? Because the Scribes and the Pharisees in the synagogues have begun to reject him. It is getting difficult to teach the ordinary people with such opposition in the synagogue and so Jesus takes his message outside 'to where the people are at', as the phrase goes. And because he is no longer in a more liturgically-based environment, he teaches the people in a manner of 'where they are at' too: he teaches them much more in parables, using the images and events of life that are familiar to them. In fact, with this parable, it is not impossible that Jesus uses the image of the sower because in his field of vision there is a sower going out to sow at that very moment nearby the crowd. The Greek actually says '*the* sower went out to sow', not 'a sower'. He may well have gesticulated towards the sower as an example of what he was trying to teach them.

And so, we begin to see not just the talents of Jesus as a master storyteller (think of the prodigal son!) but the beauty of the parables themselves. For the parables teach in a certain way. They use something simple and concrete and meet the people at their own level; but they do not leave them there. They point to something more; they grab their attention in order to make them reason it out for themselves.

How true is that for the faith in general? It is sometimes said that the faith is 'caught, not taught'. That is an exaggeration. Jesus is certainly teaching here, and we ought to teach. However, there is something of the parables that makes us reason it out for ourselves. They compel us but don't impel us; they make us see with our own eyes, rather than with someone else's. Jesus wants us to see some of 'the mysteries of the kingdom of God' with our own eyes so that we make a personal response, rather than being carried along by the crowd or by anyone else.

So, what is it he is compelling us to see? Well, he answers that question himself with his own explanations regarding the different responses to 'the word' (the seed sown). But it is worth bearing in mind that the Lord probably has in mind two groups of people whom he is addressing: the hearers of the word, and the preachers of the word. The former is the obvious recipients and includes all of us; the latter is a dog-whistle pitch to his disciples who will have to preach the word.

Regarding the former, the general point is surely that, while we are not in control of how the seed is sown to us (extremely prodigiously by the sower!), we are, nevertheless, partly responsible for the ground in which it is sown. The seed on the edge of the trodden path are those who, by want of their way of life, are closed to germination by the Spirit: they block out true life by fixation on their own superficial existence – and life eats them up! The seed that falls on patches of rock and spring up straight away but wither, are those whose faith is governed by their emotions: they are enthusiastic for a while but it is the will that leads, not the intellect. This is often the problem for the enthusiastic convert – many of whom lapse [the lapsation rate of converts is open for debate but often estimated to be around 50%]. Then there is the seed sown among thorns who are choked. This is quite an accurate description of so many us. It's not that we are dead; we are choked. We are choked by our many competing interests in life such that we put everything else before the worship of God, especially on a Sunday: work, the kids rugby club, shopping, etc. Then, of course, there are those who produce a crop as much as a hundredfold. Apart from the obvious candidates of the saints, we know who these people are. They are the ones (perhaps few) whom we secretly, deeply admire and make us feel wholly inadequate. They are the ones who make us want to be better people and emulate them. When it

comes to life and all that is important therein, they 'understand it' and produce fruit; not so much by their own efforts, but by the love of God which they radiate from an interior life of prayer.

Regarding the latter (the preachers of the word), that is less important here. Suffice it to say that, this parable is also one of great encouragement to the preacher or those involved in evangelisation. It is an encouragement to remain faithful and prodigious like the sower himself. It is not the preacher's task to determine or control the number of those who respond. And often, where one sows, another reaps; or where a preacher reaps, another has already sown. As St Paul says, 'the man who plants, the man who waters, count for nothing; God is everything, since it is he who gives the increase' (1 Cor 3:7).

Either way, for both hearers of the word and preachers of the word, this parable offers words of encouragement to both prepare fertile soil for the reception of the word of God, and not to become disillusioned when we see the lack of personal response.