

15th Sunday, Cycle A, July 16, 2017

When you throw a ball, it curves up into the air, before falling to the ground. The curve that the ball makes corresponds to a geometrical figure: the parabola. It should not surprise us that the word “parabola” comes from the Greek word which means “to throw out.” However, it may come as a surprise that the word “parable” also derives from that same Greek word, meaning “to throw out, or alongside.”

We have heard the parables of Jesus countless times: the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Mustard Seed, the parable of the Prodigal Son. The New Testament contains many stories that Jesus told the crowds that gathered around him, and we have heard them many times at church. Jesus tossed these stories out to his audience, much as a farmer would toss seed on the ground. That is why we call those stories “parables,” words that are tossed out to us, to take root in our hearts.

We have heard the parables of Jesus countless times, as well as the other sayings and teachings of Jesus found in the New Testament. We have heard them so often that sometimes I’m afraid that they don’t sink in. Nothing much happens.

And then, at other times, we hear the same parable, the same saying of Jesus, and something clicks. It hits us in a different way. Something has happened to us to make us more receptive to the message.

For example, maybe we know someone who has been having trouble with their kids, and one of them has run away from home. The parents would do anything to have that child back. Then, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son, and it is as though we are listening to it for the first time.

Or, perhaps someone we know dies suddenly, unexpectedly, and we hear the parable of the Messiah coming like a thief in the night. The parable takes on a whole, new, meaning.

At those times, we are like the good soil that we heard about in the parable of the seed and the sower, in today's gospel reading. At those moments, the word of God can really make a difference in our lives. When the word of God, the seed, is planted in good soil, it takes root, sprouts, and eventually produces a rich harvest.

What do we do, though, when the soil doesn't seem very good, when it appears impossible for the words to take root? Parents sometimes complain about that. No matter what we say, our kids won't listen to us. We warn them, but they don't pay attention. They are going to get hurt, if they keep living so recklessly.

Priests can experience the same difficulty. They can warn their congregation and preach at them, but it often looks as though no one is listening. No matter what you say, it doesn't seem to make a difference.

And finally, God also can have the same problem. That is why Jesus tells the parable of the sower and the seed. Sometimes the word of God falls on unreceptive soil, and nothing happens.

So, what do you do?

Sometimes, the only thing you can do is wait. Wait and watch for the right moment, the moment when the person is receptive, when the person is ready to listen. And then, strike while the anvil is hot. Speak the word, a word that will bring life and hope in the midst of despair, a word that will replace fear with strength and courage. That is what God does with us. The seed may lie dormant, but it is still alive.

That is what God promises in the first reading of today's Mass, from the prophet Isaiah:

"Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

