

Gospel text

Matthew 13: 1-23

1 One day, after Jesus had left home, he sat down on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. 2 Large crowds of people gathered around him, so much so that he was forced to get into a boat to sit down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore. 3 So he began to tell them several parables. "Once upon a time there was a farmer who began to sow. 4 While he was at work, some of his seed fell by the wayside, and the birds quickly ate it up. 5 Another part of the seed fell on stony ground with little soil, and it grew quickly for lack of depth of soil. 6 After sunrise, it was scorched by the heat and dried up for lack of root. 7 Then another part of the seed fell into thorns, which came up and choked it. 8 Finally, another part of the seed fell into good soil and began to be very fruitful, multiplying its fruit a hundredfold, or sixtyfold, or thirtyfold. 9 Whoever hears what I say, let him act on it."

10 Then the disciples come to Jesus and ask him: "Why do you speak enigmatically to people in parables?" 11 Jesus answers them, "Because you have received the gift of perceiving the mystery of the kingdom of heaven at work, while all these people have remained closed to this gift. 12 For insofar as one is open to this gift, one receives more and more. Conversely, those who close themselves to this gift will lose the little they have received. 13 That is why everything is a mystery when I speak to them in parables, so that in spite of the images I present to them they see nothing, and in spite of my words they hear nothing and understand nothing. 14 They find themselves fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, who said, 'You may hear what is said, but you will understand nothing; you may look, but you will see nothing. 15 For the heart of this people has become a wall, they have become hard of hearing, their eyes have been closed, so that they are sure not to see with their eyes and not to hear with their ears, and so that they are sure not to understand with their hearts and be forced to change their minds, which would have allowed me to heal them.' 16 But bravo for your eyes and your ears that know how to see and hear. 17 For truly I assure you, there are many prophets and righteous people of the Old Testament who would have liked to see what you see and hear what you hear, but they could not.

18 This is what is to be understood from the parable of the sower. 19 The first case, that of the seed by the wayside, refers to the person who, even though he hears the word about the kingdom, understands nothing, and then the forces of evil snatch away all that has been sown. 20 The second case, that of the seed on stony ground, refers to the person who hears the word well and welcomes it with joy. 21 But he is a superficial person without real convictions, a person of the moment, so that when life's difficulties and opposition come, he abandons everything. 22 The third case, that of the seed in the thorns, refers to the person who hears the word well, but the cares of life and the illusion of riches choke that word and it becomes sterile. 23 The fourth case, that of the seed in the good soil, refers to the person who both hears the word well and understands it, and therefore, without surprise, gives a yield multiplied a hundredfold, for one, sixtyfold, for another, and thirtyfold, for another.

Gospel commentary - Homily

What is really going on in the world?

Hans Rosling is a Swedish physician, professor of public health, who has practiced medicine all over the world, but is best known for his crusade against ignorance about real progress in the world. For example, the 1960s image of a world where the majority of people belong to the developing world, with large families and a high infant mortality rate, versus a minority of people belonging to the developed world, with small families and a very low infant mortality rate is maintained. But the UN figures show that today the majority of people belong to the developed world. Similarly, if we look at the issue of girls' education, even in poor countries 60% of girls have completed primary school. Similar conclusions can be drawn about low-income countries, where life expectancy is about 62 years and income about \$1 a day: today only 9% of the population belongs to this group. In fact, the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty has been reduced by half in twenty years. This is all the more remarkable since in the year 1800, 85% of humanity lived in extreme poverty. One could add a great number of facts about the progress made: the disappearance of legal slavery, the drastic reduction of deaths on the battlefields, in natural disasters or in pandemics, the virtual disappearance of child labor. Many things that were once tolerated, such as pedophilia and sexual harassment, are no longer tolerated today. Of course, this does not take away the new challenges, such as climate change. But we tend to forget how far we've come.

It seems to me essential to be aware of this progress in order to enter into today's gospel. We are probably very familiar with the parable of the sower where the seed falls into four different environments: the roadside where the birds come and devour it; the stony ground where it dries up for lack of soil; the thorns that end up choking it; the good soil where its fruit multiplies. For Jesus, this parable expressed his faith in the success of his mission: just as a seed does not give any result in many cases, and a little good soil is enough for the results to be extraordinary, so Jesus was convinced that, despite opposition and rejection, his preaching would give extraordinary results. The first communities wanted to update this parable for their particular situation as their missionaries crisscrossed the Mediterranean world and formed small communities everywhere: they saw in the situation of the seed on the side of the road a reference to the people who did not understand the Christian message and let paganism guide their lives; in the stony ground, they saw a reference to superficial people who tend to follow fashions and, at the slightest opposition, give up everything; in the thorny environment, they saw a reference to people torn between true faith in the Christian message and the lure of worldly wealth and concerns; finally, in the good soil environment, they saw a reference to committed members of the community, each according to his or her charisma.

If Matthew has taken up here what Mark's gospel offered him, he has felt the need to flesh out this passage by recourse to Isaiah's prophecy in which God reproaches his people for not seeing and understanding anything, because their hearts are closed, their ears blocked, their eyes closed. Why is this so? What is at stake here in the context of a word sown? We must

broaden the notion of word here? Because the whole reality of the universe, and not only the Gospel, can be a word to those who know how to see, listen and understand. The word of Isaiah presented by Matthew belongs to a period in which Israel is experiencing a period of prosperity, of luxury, and in which a class of landlords is appearing who are monopolizing the land and the poor are being crushed. For many people this is normal, but the prophet sees injustice in it. For Matthew, many people do not understand what Jesus represents. Note that in his interpretation of the parable of the sower, the word "understand" comes up several times. What is it that we don't understand? Jesus represents a vision of the world, think of his beatitudes, and a faith that a new world is coming. When he sends his disciples on a mission, what does he tell them? "Heal the people and proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near." People who discredit Isaiah or Jesus say, "Come on, we have to be realistic, and we know how the world works, it has always been like this, and will always be like this." Why this reaction?

First of all, it is very difficult to observe the progress of humanity, because these changes take place slowly, sometimes over centuries, which is beyond the scope of a lifetime of observations. Let's remember Hans Rosling's statement that in the year 1800 85% of humanity lived in extreme poverty, while today the proportion is 9%. This is an observation over 200 years. Regardless of various religious convictions, the dynamism of the kingdom is at work in many hearts, and any profound transformation takes time.

There is a second reason why we cannot see the dynamism of the kingdom at work: we have no idea what its final state will be. When someone like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett says she wants to implement the kingdom of God, especially by fighting abortion, she is dead wrong. This plan does not exist anywhere, and cannot be reduced to rules. Jesus simply responded to the love that dwelt in him, and this led him on the road that was his, without there being a script written in advance and a roadmap: he trusted in the mystery at the source of this world, whom he called his Father, so that through his life the kingdom would advance. And this trust must have been very great, because the parable speaks of a yield multiplied to a hundred. It is up to us to have the same confidence, and to dare to believe that we too are contributing, in our own way, to the coming of the kingdom.

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