

Sunday, July 12, 2020

Starting this Sunday, the Gospel readings for the Sunday Mass in the coming three weeks are taken from Matthew chapter 13. Matthew 13 is third among the five great discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, and contains the Parable Discourse of Jesus. Each parable gives us a unique aspect of the kingdom. On account of the mounting opposition from the hostile religious leaders, Jesus now concentrates on the formation of his disciples by teaching them the mysteries of the kingdom through parables.

In general, a parable is a metaphor or a comparison drawn from common life or from nature designed to reveal the secrets of the kingdom challenging the hearers into action. One needs a special ability and openness to understand the parables as they are often strange or opaque in character. However, a parable is not simply a story or a comparison used to explain some religious truth, but a fictitious story which points to something really taking place in the life of the listeners.

A very good example of a parable is the story told by prophet Nathan by which David comes to realize the seriousness of his own sin (Read 2 Sam 12:1-7). Thus, a parable enables the listener to listen to it as someone else's story and look at his own situation objectively from the outside. He is not a passive recipient of the story but has the task of investigating its implication in his own life. It is important that the listener understand the message instead of trying to find a meaning for individual details. The parables give us a single message, and individual details have no meaning in a parable.

Today's Gospel Reading (Matthew 13:1-9) is about the sowing of seeds on the ground. In the Bible and in Jewish literature, the sowing of seeds was an important image used to explain God's dealings with his people Israel (Jer 31:27-28; Ezek 36:9; Hos 2:21-23; 4 Ezra 8:6; 9:31).

The focus of this parable is **NOT** on the sower or on the seed, but on what **God does**. The parables are never a moral or an ethical preaching, even though we may derive moral and ethical teachings from the Gospel. However, the Gospels are **PRIMARILY NOT** a moral teaching. Instead, they are a proclamation of the **GOOD NEWS** that despite the apparent human failures, God is in charge and takes care of us. That is why the Gospels are a good news (never an advice). Therefore, this parable is not about the sower as is usually understood. Very often we give emphasis on verses 18-23, which were a later addition to the Gospel. Verses 18-23 are not found in the Gospel of Thomas and were a response to problems that were being experienced in the second and third generation.

Instead, the parable is about the compassion and Grace of God who rewards the sower with a rich harvest of hundred fold even with one-fourth of the seed. First, the seeds that fell on the path are devoured by birds (verse 4). Second, the seeds that fell on rocky ground was scorched by the sun because they had no roots (verses 5-6). Thirdly, those among the thorn were choked (verse 7). Despite the many difficulties the sower encountered, finally, the seeds that fell on good ground yielded a rich and extraordinary harvest (v. 8).

In the context of the opposition and rejection Jesus encountered from the hostile groups and in the context of the persecution the early Christians suffered in the first century, the message of the parable is that we should not lose heart when faced with difficulties in our life and mission. The kingdom of God is always preceded by apparent failures and loss; but it always advances and will always accomplish its purpose (Isa 55:10-11). Joachim Jeremias says that what God has begun in the ministry of Jesus and in the ministry of the disciples, despite apparent failure, will ultimately meet with success. John Dominic Crossan emphasizes the miracle of the harvest (hundred fold) rather than its size (a mere one fourth of seed), calling our attention to the graciousness of God.

Thus, the message of this parable is that there will always be resistance and obstacles in our life (in the form of relapses, failures, diseases, betrayal, etc.). However, God, being gracious and compassionate, will always carry us through these difficult times in our life. All that is required of us is that we keep trusting in Him and returning to Him. We don't merit anything (as if we are great), but it is God who is gracious and steadfast in loving us (Exodus 34:6). Amen.