

15th Sunday of the Year (Cycle A)

(Isa 55:10-11; Rom 8:18-23; Matt 13:1-13[9])

First, a little one question quiz: What do we use more than almost anything else, and yet almost never think about? I could probably have you raise hands and never get the answer I have in mind. I'm thinking of words. We use them all the time: conversation, reading, telephone, radio, TV, computer, texting, twitter, for advertising, for instruction—thousands of other uses. So common is the exchange of words that teachers have to worry about students texting during class, not paying attention; hopefully no one would be so bad as to do that in church, during a homily. But how often do we think of them? Yet how important they are to us! We need to use them carefully. It has been said, with perhaps at least a grain of truth: "People may forgive you anything you do, but they'll never forgive anything you say." St. James says: "If anyone does not sin with the tongue, he is a perfect person, able to bridle his whole body also" (Jas 3:2).

If even the human word is so important, so powerful, how much more the word of God? When a lector reads the first reading or the epistle, she concludes, "The word of the Lord," and we understand how important it is. We used to say, "This is the word of the Lord." Do you know the reason the bishops mandated that little change? It is because when lectors said "THIS is the word of the Lord," they would usually raise the book and so give the impression that the word of God is contained in the book.

Words in a book are simply ink on paper: the Word of the Lord is that which has been proclaimed, is now (hopefully) in our minds and in our hearts.

Today's first reading, from Isaiah, is all about the power of the word of God: just as the rain and snow from above accomplish the purpose for which God sends them, to make the earth fruitful and provide nourishment for us, so does God's word accomplish that for which He sent it. And what is that end? We can sum it one in one word: redemption. Now redemption is a very inclusive term. If we were to capture a live Catholic and set him/her here and ask "What does "redemption" mean? The answer might be "to save the soul," or "to go to heaven," and they would be partially correct, but it means so much more. First of all, we are human beings, not disembodied souls, so redemption relates to the whole person, it will involve also the body. And though we are individuals, we are also members of society, and we could not be whole persons if we did not wish all of society to be redeemed with us. Finally, society itself does not exist in a vacuum but is a part of the whole cosmos; the cosmos would not be complete without us, nor we without it. So redemption has a cosmic aspect.

St. Paul asserts that very clearly in today's epistle: he speaks of creation as it is now being "made subject to futility," of its "slavery to corruption," and "groaning in labor pains." From all these it is to be delivered, as will we, as we "await the redemption of our bodies."(N.B.) If we think of it on the purely earthly level, what is meant by "corruption," we see our waterways being polluted, our air

being corrupted. When I was young I used to be able to look up at night and see the sky ablaze with stars, brilliant, beyond counting. How many can see that today; perhaps it you went far out into the desert, but never in the city. Or if we think of the world culture. What part of the world does not know wars, slums that stretch for miles, housing thousands or tens of thousands of underprivileged, starving, despairing people, often existing right next to neighborhoods that are rich and affluent. I think we can all agree that our culture is in need of redemption.

This situation is all our own doing, the product of greed, selfishness, and lack of compassion for the miserable. But God has not left us without instruction and direction. The Old Testament is full of concern for the poor. From the Book of Proverbs we read: “He who oppresses the poor blasphemes his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy glorifies him” (14:31); “He who has compassion on the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his good deed” (19:17). And of the condemnation by the prophets of human heartlessness, just these past two weeks we have heard from the prophets Amos and Hosea. And from Micah, too, we hear: “Woe to those who covet fields, and seize them; houses and take them; you cheat owners of their houses, people of their inheritance” (2:2). Sounds like our current mortgage crisis, doesn’t it?

But God has given us not only the words of the prophets, but, most importantly His only Son, the Word of God made flesh. He walked among us and spoke God’s word to us more directly than the prophets. Not only that,

but He came for our redemption, to provide grace and strength to do God's will. So why isn't the world completely changed, redeemed? As we often hear it said, so creation can say, "God isn't through with me yet." The sending of His Son, the Word, is the most immediate way God continues His work. Today's gospel is the parable of the sower. I could have read a longer version, with an explanation, but I think we all understand that the seed is the word of God and the soil on which it falls is the human heart—that is, on the heart of each of us.

How do we receive the word? How do we put it into effect? Does it flourish in our heart or wither up and die? The most important of the words Jesus spoke to us are in the Sermon on the Mount. The beginning of that is "Blessed are the poor in spirit." He isn't exalting poverty, but He certainly tells us not to be attached to wealth, not to be greedy. Now we have a wonderful example in our Holy Father, Pope Francis. The riches of the Church are at His feet, but he lives in a small apartment and drives a used car (they joke that he should have a bumper sticker that says, "My other car is a Pope mobile). He not only exhorts us to live simple lives and to be generous to the poor, but he leads by example. How different from the billionaires who think about nothing except money and getting more of it! If all would be "poor in spirit," world poverty would be ended. "Blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your heavenly Father." If we would take these words not just as beautiful

sentiments, but take them to heart and act on them, wars could be brought to an end. Good example is infectious, good will is infectious. People will treat you as you treat them and by our good actions we can change the world. Don't ask, "How about all those other people out there who won't do right?" Don't worry about other people; God will deal with them. Concentrate on your part of the cosmos, that is, yourself.

So how about the redemption of the cosmos? Will that come about in an instant, as God zaps it from on high? He could do it that way, but what would that accomplish? Manifest God's omnipotence? God doesn't want that; He wants us to change ourselves, wants us to change the world. God's word is effective, achieves the end for which He sent it, but He will not do it without us; the word must fall on good soil (our hearts) and bring forth much fruit. It may happen only very slowly, but God is all wise in His ways, and very patient. Remember, it took the universe 13.8 billion years to get where it is. God may be willing to wait that long, but we shouldn't be.

