

## GOSPEL

MATTHEW 13:1-23

Jesus left the house and sat by the lakeside, but such crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat there. The people all stood on the beach, and he told them many things in parables.

He said, 'Imagine a sower going out to sow. As he sowed, some seeds fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on patches of rock where they found little soil and sprang up straight away, because there was no depth of earth; but as soon as the sun came up they were scorched and, not having any roots, they withered away. Others fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Others fell on rich soil and produced their crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Listen, anyone who has ears!'

Then the disciples went up to him and asked, 'Why do you talk to them in parables?' 'Because' he replied 'the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are revealed to you, but they are not revealed to them. For anyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding.

'You, therefore, are to hear the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom without understanding, the evil one comes and carries off what was sown in his heart: this is the man who received the seed on the edge of the path. The one who received it on patches of rock is the man who hears the word and welcomes it at once with joy. But he has no root in him, he does not last; let some trial come, or some persecution on account of the word, and he falls away at once. The one who received the seed in thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this world and the lure of riches choke the word and so he produces nothing. And the one who received the seed in rich soil is the man who hears the word and understands it; he is the one who yields a harvest and produces now a hundredfold, now sixty, now thirty.'

## A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

When Jesus spoke, he used simple words and he also used images which were examples taken from daily life, in order to be easily understood by all. This is why they listened to him willingly and appreciated his message which directly touched their heart. And it was not that complicated language

which was difficult to understand, as that used by the Doctors of the Law of that time, which was not easily understood, was very rigid and distanced people. And with this language Jesus made the mystery of the Kingdom of God understood; it was not complicated theology. And one example is that of today's Gospel passage: the parable of the sower.

The sower is Jesus. With this image, we can see that he presents himself as one who does not impose himself, but rather offers himself. He does not attract us by conquering us, but by donating himself: he casts seeds. With patience and generosity, he spreads his Word, which is not a cage or a trap, but a seed which can bear fruit. And how can it bear fruit? If we welcome it.

Therefore, the parable concerns us especially. In fact, it speaks more of the soil than of the sower. Jesus carries out, so to speak, a "spiritual X-ray" of our heart, which is the soil on which the seed of the Word falls. Our heart, like the soil, may be good and then the Word bears fruit — and a great deal — but it can also be hard and impermeable. This happens when we hear the Word but it bounces off of us, just as on a street: it does not enter.

Between the good soil and the street; the asphalt — if we throw a seed on the "sanpietrini" (cobblestones), nothing grows — there are however, two intermediate types of soil which, in different amounts, we can have within us. The first, Jesus says, is rocky. Let us try to imagine it: rocky ground is a terrain that "does not have much soil", so the seed sprouts but is unable to put down deep roots. This is how the superficial heart is: it welcomes the Lord, wants to pray, love and bear witness, but does not persevere; it becomes tired and never "takes off". It is a heart without depth, where the rocks of laziness prevail over the good soil, where love is fickle and fleeting. But whoever welcomes the Lord only when they want to does not bear fruit.

Then, there is the last ground, the thorny one, filled with briars which choke the good plants. What do these thorns represent? "The cares of the world and the delight in riches", as Jesus says explicitly. The thorns are the vices which come to blows with God, which choke his presence: above all these are the idols of worldly wealth, living avidly, for oneself, for possessions and for power. If we cultivate these thorns, we choke God's growth within us. Each of us can recognize his or her big or small thorns, the vices that inhabit the heart, those more or less deeply rooted briars that God does not like and that prevent us from having a clean heart. It is necessary to tear them out, otherwise the Word cannot bear fruit, the seed will not grow.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus invites us today to look inside ourselves: to give thanks for our good soil and to tend the soil that is not yet good. Let us ask ourselves if our heart is open to welcome the seed of the Word of God with faith. Let us ask ourselves if our rocks of laziness are still numerous and large; let us identify our thorns of vice and call them by name. Let us find the courage to reclaim the soil, to effect a nice conversion of our heart, bringing to the Lord in Confession and in prayer our rocks and our thorns. In doing this, Jesus, the Good Sower will be glad to carry out an additional task: purify our hearts by removing the rocks and the thorns which choke his Word.

May the Mother of God, whom we remember today with the title of Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel, unparalleled in welcoming the Word of God and putting it into practice (cf. Lk 8:21), help us to purify our hearts and welcome the Lord's presence there.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What sort of soil do you think you are? What sort of soil do you desire to be?
- Are there times when you have been rich soil and other times less so?
- Pope Francis suggests we can improve the quality and fruitfulness of our soil. What might you be able to do to improve the quality of your soil and remove the thorns that stop you responding to the word of God, to believing the Gospel and acting on it?

## PRAYER

*Spend some time in prayer with one another*

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.