

Sexagesima Sunday;

Luke 8:4-15

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be? And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

I. THE NATURE OF THE WORD SPOKEN HERE

1. This Gospel treats of the disciples and the fruits, which the Word of God develops in the world. It does not speak of the law nor of human institutions; but, as Christ himself says, of the Word of God, which he himself the sower preaches, for the law bears no fruit, just as little as do the institutions of men. Christ however sets forth here four kinds of disciples of the divine Word.

II. THE DISCIPLES OF THIS WORD

2. The first class of disciples are those who hear the Word but neither understand nor esteem it. And these are not the mean people in the world, but the greatest, wisest and the most saintly, in short they are the greatest part of mankind; for Christ does not speak here of those who persecute the Word nor of those who fail to give their ear to it, but of those who hear it and are students of it, who also wish to be called true Christians and to live in Christian fellowship with Christians and are partakers of baptism and the Lord's Supper. But they are of a carnal heart, and remain so, failing to appropriate the Word of God to themselves, it goes in one ear and out the other. Just like the seed along the wayside did not fall into the earth, but remained lying on the ground in the wayside, because the road was tramped hard by the feet of man and beast and it could not take root.

3. Therefore Christ says the devil cometh and taketh away the Word from their heart, that they may not believe and be saved. What power of Satan this alone reveals, that hearts, hardened through a worldly mind and life, lose the Word and let it go, so that they never understand or confess it; but instead of the Word of God Satan sends false teachers to tread it under foot by the doctrines of men. For it stands here written both that it was trodden under foot, and the birds of the heaven devoured it. The birds Christ himself interprets as the messengers of the devil, who snatch away the Word and devour it, which is done when he turns and blinds their hearts so that they neither understand nor esteem it, as St. Paul says in 2 Tim 4, 4: *"They will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables."* By the treading under foot of men Christ means the teachings of men, that rule in our hearts, as he says in Mt 5, 13 also of the salt that has lost its savor, it is cast out and trodden under foot of men; that is, as St. Paul says in 2 Th 2, 11, they must believe a lie because they have not been obedient to the truth.

4. Thus all heretics, fanatics and sects belong to this number, who understand the Gospel in a carnal way and explain it as they please, to suit their own ideas, all of whom hear the Gospel and yet they bear no fruit, yea, more, they are governed by Satan and are harder oppressed by human institutions than they were before they heard the Word. For it is a dreadful utterance that Christ here gives that the devil taketh away the Word from their hearts, by which he clearly proves that the devil rules mightily in their hearts, notwithstanding they are called Christians and hear the Word. Likewise it sounds terribly that they are to be trodden under foot, and must be subject unto men and to their ruinous teachings, by which under the appearance and name of the Gospel the devil takes the Word from them, so that they may never believe and be saved, but must be lost forever; as the fanatical spirits of our day do in all lands. For where this Word is not, there is no salvation, and great works or holy lives avail nothing, for with this, that he says: *"They shall not be saved,"* since they have not the Word, he shows forcibly enough, that not their works but their faith in the Word alone saves, as Paul says to the Romans: *"It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."* Rom 1, 16.

5. The second class of hearers are those who receive the Word with joy, but they do not persevere. These are also a large multitude who understand the Word correctly and lay hold of it in its purity without any spirit of sect, division or fanaticism, they rejoice also in that they know the real truth, and are able to know how they may be saved without works through faith. They also know that they are free from the bondage of the law, of their conscience and of human teachings; but when it comes to the test that they must suffer harm, disgrace and loss of life or property, then they fall and deny it; for they have not root enough, and are not planted deep enough in the soil. Hence they are like the growth on a rock, which springs forth fresh and green, that it is a pleasure to behold it and it awakens bright hopes. But when the sun shines hot it withers, because it has no soil and moisture, and only rock is there. So these do; in times of persecution they deny or keep silence about the Word, and work, speak and suffer all that their persecutors mention or wish, who formerly went forth and spoke, and confessed with a fresh and joyful spirit the same, while there was still peace and no heat, so that there was hope they would bear much fruit and serve the people. For these fruits are not only the works, but more the confession, preaching and spreading of the Word, so that many others may thereby be converted and the kingdom of God be developed.

6. The third class are those who hear and understand the Word, but still it falls on the other side of the road, among the pleasures and cares of this life, so that they also do nothing with the Word. And there is quite a large multitude of these; for although they do not start heresies, like the first, but always possess the absolutely pure Word, they are also not attacked on the left as the others with opposition and persecution; yet they fall on the right side, and it is their ruin that they enjoy peace and good days. Therefore they do not earnestly give themselves to the Word, but become indifferent and sink in the cares, riches and pleasures of this life, so that they are of no benefit to any one. Therefore they are like the seed that fell among the thorns. Although it is not rocky but good soil; not wayside but deeply plowed soil; yet, the thorns will not let it spring up, they choke it. Thus these have all in the Word that is needed for their salvation, but they do not make any use of it, and they rot in this life in carnal pleasures. To these belong those who hear the Word but do not bring under subjection their flesh. They know their duty but do it not, they teach but do not practice what they teach, and are this year as they were last.

7. The fourth class are those who lay hold of and keep the Word in a good and honest heart, and bring forth fruit with patience, those who hear the Word and steadfastly retain it, meditate upon it and act in harmony with it. The devil does not snatch it away, nor are they thereby led astray, moreover the heat of persecution does not rob them of it, and the thorns of pleasure and the avarice of the times do not hinder its growth; but they bear fruit by teaching others and by developing the kingdom of God, hence they also do good to their neighbor in love; and therefore Christ adds, "they bring forth fruit with patience." For these must suffer much on account of the Word, shame and disgrace from fanatics and heretics, hatred and jealousy with injury to body and property from their persecutors, not to mention what the thorns and the temptations of their own flesh do, so that it may well be called the Word of the cross; for he who would keep it must bear the cross and misfortune, and triumph.

8. He says: "In honest and good hearts." Like a field, that is without a thorn or brush, cleared and spacious, as a beautiful clean place: so a heart is also cleared and clean, broad and spacious, that is without cares and avarice as to temporal needs, so that the Word of God truly finds lodgment there. But the field is good, not only when it lies there cleared and level, but when it is also rich and fruitful, possesses soil and is productive, and not like a stony and gravelly field. Just so is the heart that has good soil and with a full spirit is strong, fertile and good to keep the Word and bring forth fruit with patience.

9. Here we see why it is no wonder there are so few true Christians, for all the seed does not fall into good ground, but only the fourth and small part; and that they are not to be trusted who boast they are Christians and praise the teaching of the Gospel; like Demas, a disciple of St. Paul, who forsook him at last, 2 Tim 4, 10; like the disciples of Jesus, who turned their backs to him. Jn 6, 66. For Christ himself cries out here: "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear," as if he should say: O, how few true Christians there are; one dare not believe all to be Christians who are called Christians and hear the Gospel, more is required than that.

10. All this is spoken for our instruction, that we may not go astray, since so many misuse the Gospel and few lay hold of it aright. True it is unpleasant to preach to those who treat the Gospel so shamefully and even oppose it. For preaching is to become so universal that the Gospel is to be proclaimed to all creatures, as Christ says in Mk 16, 15: "Preach the Gospel to the whole creation;" and Ps 19, 4: "Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." What business is it of mine that many do not esteem it? It must be that many are called but few are chosen. For the sake of the good ground that brings forth fruit with patience, the seed must also fall fruitless by the wayside, on the rock and among the thorns; inasmuch as we are assured that the Word of God does not go forth without bearing some fruit, but it always finds also good ground; as Christ says here, some seed of the sower falls also into good ground, and not only by the wayside, among the thorns and on stony ground. For wherever the Gospel goes you will find Christians. *"My word shall not return unto me void." Is 55,11.*

III. THE FRUIT OF THIS WORD

11. Here observe that Mk 4, 8 and Mt 13, 8 say the seed yielded fruit some thirty, some sixty and some a hundredfold, which according to all interpretations is understood Of three kinds of chastity, that of virgins, married persons and widows; and virgins are credited with a hundredfold of fruit, wedded persons with thirtyfold, the least of all, and widows with sixtyfold. But this is such coarse and corrupt talk that it is a sin and a shame that this interpretation has continued so long in Christendom and has been advocated by so many noted teachers, and criticised by none of them. In this one perceives how many wide-awake, well-armed and faithful teachers the church has had heretofore, and how one blindly believed another, and how God allowed many noted saints and people to play the fool so completely in these important matters pertaining to the soul that he warned us to believe no teacher, however saintly and great he may be, unless he comes with the pure Word of God.

12. First, it would be doing the Word of God injustice to hold that it brings forth no other fruit than chastity, since St. Paul boasts quite differently in Gal 5, 22. In brief, the Word of God accomplishes all good, it makes us wise, sensible, prudent, cautious, pious, kind, patient, faithful, discreet, chaste, etc. Hence this comment referring only to three kinds of chastity is wholly unchristian. The heathen and wicked people, who neither possess the Gospel nor persecute it, have also virgins, widows and married persons. Doubtless Anna and Caiaphas had been properly married. Thus there were virgins, widows and consorts before the Word of God; for virgins were born, and when the Gospel comes it finds virgins, widows and wives; the Gospel did not first make them virgins, widows or wives.

13. Secondly, thus marriage, virginity and widowhood are not fruits, nor virtues, nor good works; but three stations or states in life created and ordained by God, and are not creatures of our power. They are divine works and creations like all other creatures. For if it should be valid to interpret a station or state in life as good fruit, one would have to say the state of a lord, a servant, a man, a child and of officers was only fruit of the Gospel; in this way there would be no fruit at all left for the Gospel, since such states or callings are found everywhere regardless of the Gospel. But the chastity of virgins is paraded thus for the sake of a show, to the great danger and injury of immortal souls; just as if no virtue adorns a Christian but virginity.

14. I will say further, that chastity is a different and a far higher thing than virginity, and is nothing more than that a woman has never been under any obligation to a man. Besides, however, it is possible that a virgin has not only a desire and a passion for man, in harmony with the character and nature of her female body; but she must also be full of blood and life in order to bear children and multiply the race, for which God created her, and that creation is not her work but God's alone. Therefore that woman may not hinder God's work, nature as created by God must take its course, whether children be born or not. But chastity must indeed be a state of a woman's mind that has no or little desire for man, and has in her body also little or no seed to bear fruit or children.

15. Now it is generally the case that a married woman does not so often experience such desire and lust, such a flow of love or life; for she will be relieved of the same by or through her husband; and besides, where a virgin has only passion in the thoughts of her heart and in the seed of her body, a married woman has much displeasure mingled with the pleasure of her husband, so that to speak in common terms, the high and best chastity is in the married state, because in it is the least lust and passion, while the least chastity is in the state of virgins, because in it there is much more lust and passion. Therefore chastity is a virtue far above virginity; for we call a bride still a virgin, although she is indeed full of desire, passion and love for her bridegroom. Chastity waves high over all three states, over marriage, over widowhood and over virginity. But when God does not work wonders it sinks low and exists most in the married state and least in the state of virgins, and there are not three kinds of chastity, but three states of chastity.

16. True, when we consider virginity according to its outward appearance, it seems great that a woman restrains herself and never satisfies her desires with a man. But what does it help if

persons restrain their passions longer without a man or a woman and then satisfy them more than with a man or woman? Is there not more unchastity where there is greater lust, love, lewdness and sensation than where there is less? Therefore to calculate according to the amount of lust and sensation, as unchastity should be considered, virginity is more unchaste

than the state of marriage. This is very apparent among prostitutes, who are virgins and yet are very forward and obscene, and cherish greater thoughts of the sin than the sin itself is. In short, I wonder if there is a virgin twenty years of age, who has a healthy, perfect female body.

17. This is enough concerning chastity, that we know how the fruits of the Word must be understood differently and in a wider sense than pertaining to chastity, and be applied especially to the fruits, by which many are converted and come to the knowledge of the truth. For although works are also called fruits, yet Christ speaks here especially of the fruits the seed of the Word brings forth in hearts that become enlightened, believing, happy and wise in Christ, as St. Paul says in Rom 1, 13: "That I might have some fruit in you also, even as in the rest of the Gentiles;" and Col 1, 6: "Even as the Gospel is also in all the world bearing fruit and increasing, as it doth in you also;" that is, many will be made alive through the Gospel, delivered from their sins and be saved; for it is the characteristic work of the Gospel, as the Word of life, grace and salvation to release from sin, death and Satan. In harmony with this fruit follow the fruits of the Spirit, the good works of patience, love, faithfulness, etc.

18. Now that some seed brings forth thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred fold, means that more people will be converted in some places than in others, and one apostle and minister may preach farther and more than another; for the people are not everywhere alike numerous and do not report the same number of Christians, and one minister may not preach as many sermons or cover as great a territory as another, which God foresaw and ordained. To the words of St. Paul, who preached the farthest and the most, we may indeed ascribe the hundredfold of fruit; although he was not a virgin.

IV. WHY CHRIST CALLS THE DOCTRINE CONCERNING THE DISCIPLES AND THE FRUITS OF THE WORD A MYSTERY

19. But what does it mean when he says: "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God", etc.? What are the mysteries? Shall one not know them, why then are they preached? A "mystery" is a hidden secret, that is not known: and the "mysteries of the kingdom of God" are the things in the kingdom of God, as for example Christ with all his grace, which he manifests to us, as Paul describes him; for he who knows Christ aright understands what God's kingdom is and what is in it. And it is called a mystery because it is spiritual and secret, and indeed it remains so, where the Spirit does not reveal it. For although there are many who see and hear it, yet they do not understand it. Just as there are many who preach and hear Christ, how he offered himself for us; but all that is only upon their tongue and not in their heart; for they themselves do not believe it, they do not experience it, as Paul in 1 Cor 2, 14 says: "The natural man received not the things of the

Spirit of God!” Therefore Christ says here: ”Unto you it is given”, the Spirit gives it to you that you not only hear and see it, but acknowledge and believe it with your heart. Therefore it is now no longer a mystery to you. But to others who hear it as well as you, and have no faith in their heart, they see and understand it not; to them it is a mystery and it will continue unknown to them, and all that they hear is only like one hearing a parable or a dark saying. This is also proved by the fanatics of our day, who know so much to preach about Christ; but as they themselves do not experience it in their heart, they rush ahead and pass by the true foundation of the mystery and tramp around with questions and rare foundlings, and when it comes to the test they do not know the least thing about trusting in God and finding in Christ the forgiveness of their sins.

20. But Mark says, 4, 33, Christ spake therefore to the people with parables, that they might understand, each according to his ability. How does that agree with what Matthew says, 13, 13-14: He spake therefore unto them in parables, because they did not understand? It must surely be that Mark wishes to say that parables serve to the end that they may get a hold of coarse, rough people, although they do not indeed understand them, yet later, they may be taught and then they know: for parables are naturally pleasing to the common people, and they easily remember them since they are taken from common every day affairs, in the midst of which the people live. But Matthew means to say that these parables are of the nature that no one can understand them, they may grasp and hear them as often as they will, unless the Spirit makes them known and reveals them. Not that they should preach that we shall not understand them; but it naturally follows that wherever the Spirit does not reveal them, no one understands them. However, Christ took these words from Is 6, 9-10, where the high meaning of the divine foreknowledge is referred to, that God conceals and reveals to whom he will and whom he had in mind from eternity.

