

15th Sunday
7/12/2020

TESTING THE SOIL

Gross is the heart of this people...lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears...and I heal them. What's up with that? Doesn't God want people to come to conversion? Of course he does. So what does this mean? Over 500 years before the coming of Jesus, Isaiah spoke these words that as one author has noted, possibly express frustration with those who refuse to listen. This all comes a few chapters after the long and moving Sermon on the Mount when Jesus does speak clearly. Perhaps Jesus has experienced some frustration and so now he tries a different approach with what is known as the Parables Discourse.

It says that Jesus got into a boat. This gave him some distance from the crowd and the water could possibly amplify his voice. It also says he sat down which is the position of a teacher.

Now in Hebrew thought the heart is more than the seat of the emotions. It's the center of the person including the mind. To speak of people with a gross heart can mean that people can be so proud that they don't know they need to know; so stubborn, so difficult, so resistant or so lazy that they won't even try to understand God's word and so they shut themselves off from it.

Think of a callous, skin that has become so hardened that even when touched is unable to feel. Our minds and hearts can become so dull, our hearts so callous, that even when God speaks, it makes no difference. Sometimes we don't hear or see because we don't want to hear or see. Since we refuse to listen, we cannot hear and since we refuse to look we cannot see. In other words, we choose to deprive ourselves of God's word and we don't deserve to receive it.

But we can also think of it this way. Perhaps Jesus speaks in parables to force people to think, to engage and encourage them toward conversion of heart. Parables can stay with us in a way that a speech cannot. Parables can make us think and perhaps even wake up sleeping hearts. If that could happen to people centuries ago, it serves as a warning to us that we can do the same thing. We can develop a hardness of heart, like rocky ground where the seed of God's word finds no place to grow.

Sometimes before planting a crop, farmers may take a soil test. The more they know of the ground and its makeup, the more wisely they can treat the soil and plant their seeds so that there is an abundant harvest. What's the soil of your heart like right now? Perhaps it can be hard with little soil, little room for growth. The seed of God's word can wither for lack of roots. And that leads to another question, how deep are your roots?

As Catholic Christians we have many deep roots: the word of God, the gift of prayer, beautiful schools of spirituality, Mary and the saints, the teaching authority of the Church nearly two thousand years old and the rich Jewish heritage that we claim prior to that, the presence of one another, and the seven sacraments, and in a special way Reconciliation and the Eucharist. It's all there. It's all there for the receiving but we have to be willing to receive it. Being rooted keeps us from being scorched. To be rooted allows us to persevere. To persevere means to serve through. To serve through the good times, to serve through the bad times and all the times in between.

The gospel continues: *When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away.* In other words, they don't persevere. You could say that what we've been experiencing for the last four months has been a tribulation—not because of the word of God because this affects the whole world—but still a tribulation. It calls us to delay gratification and even to sacrifice; to let go of our own plans and our own convenience for the sake of the common good, and out of love for our neighbor. It also has within it a hidden invitation for spiritual growth; to depend more on God rather than ourselves and to unite our sacrifices, sometimes small, sometimes larger, with the big sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

Jesus goes on to talk about the thorns of worldly anxiety and the lure of riches. These are anxious times. Right now, we are dealing with an equation with many unknown variables. There is much to be anxious about but that anxiety is also a invitation to act with prudence and to an invitation to trust in God.

There's a difference between the soil where the seed lands and the soil of our hearts. The soil of the earth is a thing and it is what it is; good bad or indifferent. The soil of our heart is something living and we can do something about it. We

can dispose the soil of our hearts to receive the seed of God's word but that also requires effort on our part.

It's been said that prayer is hospitality of the heart. So is hospitality to the word of God. What's the soil of your heart like today? What needs to be enriched? What needs to be deepened? Just as importantly, what needs to be removed? We have the means to enrich that soil. Together, let us pray that God gives us the grace to receive his word, that we might show hospitality of the heart, so that it bears great fruit for him in our actions and in our lives, thirty, sixty and a hundred fold.