

This week's Gospel reading continues a trend we see developing in Matthew's Gospel. Lately we've heard some of the more difficult and more serious sayings of Jesus. In last week's Gospel, Jesus thanks the Father for having hidden "these things" from the wise and learned, but revealing them to "little ones". The "things" he refers to are the truths he has been preaching. There are the wise and intelligent from whom these things are withheld, and then there are the little ones to whom they have been revealed. He says this immediately after declaring that the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida would be brought down to Hades. These were two cities where Jesus preached and taught and performed miracles. Yet the people who lived in these two cities rejected him and the truths he taught. Apparently, people in other cities accepted Jesus and his teachings.

In another passage from Matthew, Jesus tells us not to think that he came to bring peace to the world. He says that he came not to bring peace, but a sword. His message will bring division to the world and to individual families. Some will love Him above all else and be willing to sacrifice anything and everything to follow Him. Others will not. And there will be division because of it.

This same theme of differentiation among responses to Jesus continues in today's Gospel reading.

There are many people, who, in their heart of hearts passionately believe that everyone will in the end be saved. They cannot conceive, and

cannot accept, the idea that even one single person, no matter what, will be finally lost. There are many reasons they believe so: some think that God's forgiveness is so strong that it extends to infinity, and therefore everyone will be forgiven and will enter into God's kingdom. Some think that if even one person were lost, it would mean that God's designs can be thwarted, which entails a contradiction. Almighty God cannot lose. All of His creatures belong to Him and He is incapable of losing even one for eternity. To suggest otherwise is to admit that God's power is limited, that He is not omnipotent. And that is unacceptable. The name for this belief that ultimately everyone will be saved is Universalism.

Universalism is of course very appealing. People who believe this way have very good intentions. Their desire is that everyone will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Their *desire* that everyone will enter the Kingdom of Heaven isn't wrong. *God Himself desires the very same thing – very likely far more than any of us truly realizes.*

The problem with all of this is that the reality is that not everyone will be saved. The passage from today's Gospel reading, and from other passages in Matthew do not reflect a theology of universalism. Jesus himself tells us that some remain unrepentant, some will not follow him, some will not listen and His word will not take root in them and prosper.

Today's Gospel reading of the Parable of the Sower clearly illustrates this point. Once again, we have a parable about farming. It's true that many or even most of Jesus' listeners in this scene from Matthew's Gospel

were Galilean farmers and would therefore be especially likely to understand what Jesus was saying. But non-farmers can get the message as well.

There are several things to notice about this parable. We have a sower, we have seed, we have four different kinds of soil or places where the seed was sown: on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil. We have four different outcomes: birds devouring the seed on the path, a quick harvest that quickly died, a failed harvest, and a wildly marvelous harvest the likes of which most of the Galilean farmers of the time would not have believed was possible.

We need to take notice of some of the peculiarities of the parable that we may not realize. For one thing, the practice of most farmers at the time Jesus told this parable in Galilee was to sow the seed first, and then to return later to plow the field. There is no indication anywhere in this parable that the sower has any intention of returning to plow. He sows the seed and leaves it on its own as if it needs nothing more from him. What becomes of the seed depends upon the kind of soil in which it is sown. That is the point of the story.

Secondly, notice the odd places the sower puts the seed. On a path? On rocky ground? Among thorns? What farmer would put down seed in places like that? Why not simply put all the seed in the so-called “good soil”? If the sower did that, wouldn't he have much better control over the outcome? Wouldn't he be almost guaranteeing a successful harvest? And

not only a successful harvest – a nearly miraculous harvest. Even a thirty-fold harvest was something very unusual in the experience of most farmers, let alone a sixty- or hundredfold.

Later in the Gospel Jesus identifies the sower as the Son of Man. Jesus is the sower. The seed represents the Gospel, the Kingdom of God. The soil, of course, represents the different responses people have toward Jesus and the Kingdom.

It may have been the normal practice of farmers at the time to put down seed anywhere and everywhere. But in this case, it shows that Jesus brings the Kingdom and the Gospel to every place on earth, to every person in the world. He desires that everyone will enter the Kingdom. He doesn't allow the type of soil to be a barrier to his bringing the kingdom there. He will bring the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven to every part of the earth, so that every single person gets a chance to hear it and enter.

But what He is after is not a guaranteed outcome. He doesn't want to play a rigged game. What he seeks is a *relationship* with his beloved. A relationship involves giving and receiving love, mutual communication, and sharing. Jesus seeks a response from us that we *freely* give to Him. Jesus brings the Kingdom of God to everyone, but responses to Him vary. Like the universalist, Jesus desires and wills the salvation of all people. But he won't force it. How we respond to Him *makes a difference*.

It's not that we earn our salvation. We can't. It's whether we take the free gift of salvation Jesus won for us through his sacrifice for our sins. That gift won't do us any good unless we take it. Jesus' forgiveness of our sins won't do us any good unless we confess our sins to him.

Some scholars believe Matthew includes this parable in his Gospel to help the members of his community come to terms with the fact that not everyone accepted Jesus. The community Matthew was writing to was almost entirely made up of recent Jewish converts to Christianity, which was at that time only a few decades old. It was a mysterious and perplexing thing to them at that time that many of their family members, friends and neighbors were not converting as they were. Part of the reason for this parable may be to encourage believers so they do not lose hope. Some people will not come to Jesus and enter His kingdom. It's not because He hasn't invited them in, He has. It's not because He hasn't come to them with the offer of His kingdom and His forgiveness, He has. It is because of their free choice, which he respects.

This parable puts us in the position of discerning for ourselves what kind of soil we are. Jesus' desire is that everyone would be "good soil". He doesn't bring the Gospel for the purpose of having it trampled on and ignored, or choked off by thorns, or dried up and killed by overexposure to the sun. He brings it so that we bear fruit a hundredfold.

This “bearing fruit a hundredfold” is an image of the Kingdom of Heaven. If Jesus and His word take root in us and grow, we will grow in ways we never imagined. We will enter His Kingdom. *That’s* his purpose. That is what He seeks. And that is our hope. Amen.