

July 13, 2008
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 55:10-11
Romans 8:18-23
Matthew 13:1-23

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul recognizes that we Christians live in an “already but not yet” time. Jesus came among us; he brought the Kingdom of God; he died and rose from the dead; the world was transformed by his presence. But history tells us that it has been “business as usual” ever since: war, oppression, disease, homelessness, starvation, murder, environmental destruction.

The portion of Paul’s letter which we have heard today speaks of human suffering. Paul tries to reassure his readers that suffering is not the bottom line for us; it is not our ultimate destiny. The transformation, which began with Jesus’ earthly ministry, is not yet completed. We have the “firstfruits” of the gospel; the full harvest is yet to come. But it will come.

Our struggle to bring God’s Kingdom into the world, or, to state it more accurately, our struggle not to resist the Kingdom’s coming, is compared by Paul to a woman giving birth. The child is alive; the child is present. But, in a very important sense, the child’s life journey has not yet begun. And furthermore, Paul declares that the entire creation is in labor.

Could Jesus’ Parable of the Sower be an illustration of this struggle to birth something new?

This famous parable about a sower of seeds might remind us of our own efforts to garden. Will our seeds sprout, or are they too old? Will there be enough rain or too much? Will the rabbits and deer get the stuff before we do? Will the weeds win? And the parable could also lead us to consider the challenges of growing food on a very large scale. What happens when there are droughts

or floods, or hail storms? What if a significant portion of the crops is ruined? What if factory farming methods really are bad for us and for the earth? What if transportation costs go up, as they have this year? What if transportation itself is interrupted and the supermarkets are not overflowing, as we presume they'll always be? These are life and death issues, for our own lives depend upon the ever new life of the plants we grow for food and the animals that we raise.

This is why Jesus was so effective in using farming images in his teaching. People who were close to the earth would get it. Or at least one would hope so. Through this and other parables, Jesus was describing the coming of God's Kingdom and the transformation of the world. The sower could have been himself but also the disciples who came after him. But would this message be understood and accepted? Perhaps.

In Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Sower, he spoke of situations where the good news about who God really is and what the Kingdom is all about, was not being received. Some people simply did not understand the message. Some were thrilled to hear it, but as soon as a serious challenge came in their lives, they put it aside. And for some, "the lure of riches" drowned out Jesus' words.

When it comes to us Christians' proclaiming God's Kingdom, could the messenger be getting in the way of the message? Do we talk about loving our enemies and do just the opposite? Do we talk about peace and support violence? Do we talk about the dignity of human beings and treat each other like disposable objects? Do we really believe in our hearts that Jesus' teaching is "pie in the sky" and will never work in "real" life? Do we say that Jesus comes first for us when it's evident that he's a poor second? And what does it mean for the church to claim that Jesus should come first?

Furthermore, do we realize that participating in the birth of God's kingdom is a struggle, and that we won't always get it right—something Deacon Bob's homily illustrated most effectively last

week? Are we willing to keep on sowing the seeds even when the harvest appears to be sparse?

Speaking of poor harvests, the Parable of the Sower, gives us three failures and only one success. Or does it? The seed sown on fertile ground leads to an overwhelming harvest, a magnificent harvest that more than cancels out the failures. Listen to what a 20th century Bible scholar wrote about this parable. “To human eyes much of the labour seems futile and fruitless, resulting apparently in repeated failure, but Jesus is full of joyful confidence: he knows that God has made a beginning, bringing with it a harvest of reward beyond all asking or conceiving. In spite of every failure and opposition, from hopeless beginnings, God brings forth the triumphant end which he has promised.”

And we all do have a part in bringing in the Kingdom harvest. A theologian, observing the contemporary world, warned against both pessimism and optimism. Pessimism, she wrote, will lead us to give up. Optimism might suggest that we don't have to do anything, because it'll happen anyway. But we do have to labor, for that is part of God's plan and even good things done on a small scale can result in something very big.

Last week I visited a parishioner who told me the story of a refugee family from Viet Nam, whom several folks “adopted” back in the 70's. The work they had to do to get this family settled was enormous. For instance, the children had serious tooth decay, and the family had no money. Our parishioner called thirteen dentists until she found one who said “bring them in.” He fixed their teeth without charge. And the fruits of all this labor? Today the husband has a professional job with about 30 people reporting to him. The wife owns a beauty salon. The kids have college degrees and professional work as well. All they needed was a start. And all we need to do is to respond to what God has started.

Amen.