

Rich Soil for God

- 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
- July 16, 2017
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The passage from Isaiah is often one which is recommended when a person is seeking to be more prayerful, to begin a spiritual retreat, to be at home before God in faith. As rain and snow which falls to the earth makes the land fertile, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so the word of God, God's grace, does not return to God empty or ineffective without accomplishing the purpose for which God sent it. This calls for us to trust in the work of God in us, the hidden work, like the germination of the seed in the ground, to believe that if we are open to receiving God's grace, God's action in us, then God's purpose will be accomplished in us. It's a passage for settling as we are before God, to open ourselves to God, to be confident of God's presence and power in us. You can see why it is often recommended as the entrance, or starting point, or threshold, or doorway into prayer, to a spiritual retreat, to opening oneself to more deeply hear the word of God.

But how do we dispose ourselves to God for this? It's as if Jesus, in the parable he tells in the gospel, picks up on the passage of Isaiah, and answers that question. If the word of God falls like seed on a hard path, it is not taken into our soil at all, we do not understand, so there is no chance for it to grow. If God's word or his hidden grace falls on rocky soil in us, it may be effective in our feelings for a moment, but there is no depth of soil in our rocky ground, we are superficial, so God's action in us has no lasting or changing impact. If like seed that falls among thorns, God's loving action in us is choked by our being too preoccupied or busy, it does not have a chance to take root. But... and here's what Jesus is driving at and is the answer to Isaiah's image of God's word accomplishing his purpose like rain or snow falling to the earth... if God's grace finds rich and deep soil in us, it produces thirty, or sixty, or a hundred times as much as what was sown.

What this means is that God's word accomplishes his will in us only if it falls upon, touches, takes root in what is real in us, only if it finds a place in the true soil of the self. God's grace cannot affect what is unreal in us: what is hard, what is superficial, what is false. To pray is to open oneself in faith just as one is, to be real, before God who is real and who is really present.

I'll never forget the first time I met, twenty years ago, with the 27 presidents of the other Jesuit universities of the United States in a motel in Chicago. At the end of the day of meetings—before drinks which was what we were all looking forward to—we had a quick, down-and-dirty, no-frills Jesuit Mass around the conference room table in this windowless room. One president named Al was retiring that year after two dozen years as a president, so he led the Mass. Out of a beat-up old briefcase came a wrinkled cloth, a paperback missal, a small plate, a cup, a flask of wine, some stale hosts, a candle and matches, a crucifix, and a stole. Al was ready to go and so were we. Drinks were next, so there was no stalling, no singing, just the essentials of the perfect Jesuit Mass. What I remember was what Al said in his homily, which in typical Jesuit fashion, had only the slightest connection to the readings. Al told us that the very day after he finished as president he was going to begin a 30-day silent retreat. We were a bit stunned. Al related that in

preparation for this retreat he had already gone up to the retreat house for a conversation with the Jesuit who was going to accompany him in the retreat. This Jesuit director asked Al, “What do you hope happens in the retreat? What do you want?” Al began to tell him, “I want to become closer to Jesus; I want quietly to hear the gospels; I want to grow in holiness.” Then Al stopped and blurted out, “No, no, no, I just want to get rid of all the sham of these years as president; I want to scrape off all the schmooze, all the pretending and performing; I just want to get rid of it all!” Guess why this president remembers that no-frills Jesuit homily of twenty years ago among the thousands of more elaborated ones I have heard... or given. What Al wanted was to be real, to be Al, before God. Period. No schmooze; no being nice, no pretense, real.

All Of us get coated in our cares, get preoccupied by our occupations, get covered by our pretenses, get layered by the unrealities of our culture, get removed from who we really are, get hardened, or shielded, or distanced from the good, rich deep soil of who we really are, the only reality God can affect with his word, his grace, his presence, his love.

A person named Jerry, who retired from Seattle U. last year, was asked what he was looking forward to in his retirement. He answered, “I am looking forward to seeing if I can find again the Jerry who has been buried all these years beneath all that I have done.” The real “Jerry”. Good for Jerry! And God is looking for that “Jerry”, that “you”, in each of us too.

Perhaps on a vacation or some free time this summer you have a chance to vacate from yourself all that the year has accumulated in you, coated you with, and you can open the good, rich, deep soil of the real you beneath in faith to God. That would be a very good vacation, a good freedom, that would be real prayer, and that would be a good retreat of your own kind. Let us all try to find the way to truly hear the word of God this summer. Right now let us more fully hear again the word of God of this Sunday as Jesus explains the parable: Mt 13:18-23.

Let us be rich soil so that God may accomplish his will in us.