

INTRODUCTION: Elisha is the main person in our first reading. Elisha, like the other authentic prophets, was filled with God's Spirit. He was active about 800 years before Christ. A married couple who very badly wanted to have children, but couldn't have any, offered Elisha hospitality which he gratefully accepted. Elisha wanted to return the favor and his servant told the prophet their greatest joy would be to have a child. A son would have given security to the woman in her old age. The Jews had a social obligation to treat someone who is sent to them as if the agent were the sender himself. A man's agent is like the one who sent him. For example, if the chancellor of the Archdiocese, Fr. Steve Angi, came to me and told me the Archbishop wants me to give longer homilies (he really didn't), I would be obliged to treat Fr. Angi as I would treat the Archbishop himself. In the case of Elisha who was sent by God as a prophet, the prophet could expect to be given the honor and authority of God. In today's first reading, we see the prophet speaking with the power of God and promising a child to this couple who made him welcome to her home. A year later God had blessed the lady with a little baby and she knew it was through the word of the prophet. A man's agent is like the one who sent him. Remember that – you'll hear it again.

HOMILY: To understand our gospel reading today, we need to see it in its context. It is the conclusion of chapter 10 in Matthew, but the ideas expressed in today's gospel really begin at the end of chapter 9. Chapter 9 tells us about the crowds of people who came to Jesus to hear him or to be healed by him. Jesus could hardly keep up with tending to people's needs, so he decided it was about time to put his apostles to work. Chapter 10 then begins with Jesus giving instructions to his apostles before he sends them out. The word apostle by the way means (in Greek) one who has been sent. The whole of chapter 10 is usually referred to as the Missionary Discourse, because the apostles would be serving as missionaries.

Jesus' instructions included working miracles - like healing the sick and casting out demons as Jesus did; and not worrying about the future needs they might have - like needing food or money but, instead, trusting in God's providential care. They were to bring peace to those who were open to their message and Jesus gave advice how to deal with those who were hostile to them. Jesus warned them about the rejection they would experience, just as Jesus experienced rejection. They were told not to fear anything for their Father in heaven would care for them. After all these instructions, we get to today's gospel passage.

Love and loyalty to one's family was one of the most sacred bonds a person might have in that culture. Jesus tells his apostles they must not let their love and loyalty to their family get in the way of doing the Lord's work. "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Even their own safety could not get in the way of doing God's work. Whoever tries to save his life by turning away from God will lose their life; i.e., they will lose their relationship with God who gives them life. Whoever places his relationship with God above all things, even life itself, will be greatly blessed with an abundance of life and joy.

Here is where we hear again that a man's agent is like the one who sent him. Jesus said whoever receives you receives me and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. The apostles were Jesus' agents or representatives when they were sent out, so the way they were received equaled the way they would receive Jesus; and the way they would receive Jesus equaled the way they would receive God the Father. This shows us why the Church exists, why we must listen to what the Church teaches. The Church is God's agent -

established by Christ to teach us and guide us. I certainly do not want to be on the wrong side of this equation and be guilty of rejecting God and rejecting Jesus' love and grace.

Fourteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 9, 2017

The Mission Office for our Archdiocese receives many requests each year for help in mission fields. Those mission fields are not just in Ethiopia or India or someplace far away. Appeals come also from missions here in the United States. These appeals not only help missionaries to continue their mission of spreading God's message and helping the poor, but we ourselves are reminded that the work of the Church goes beyond our parish boundaries or the boundaries of our Archdiocese. Each year we open our doors and our purses to help some specific missionary endeavor. Today we have a speaker who will tell us about the work she is involved with and she will ask for our support. There is a special envelope in the pews that you can use to offer some support for her ministry. I would ask you to hear what she has to say before you decide what you can afford to donate. Then bring the envelope next week and put it in the collection basket. If you want to donate right away, give your donation envelope to Fr. Joe at the end of Mass. Because we have a special speaker, my homily today will be exceptionally brief.

Jesus is praying out loud; perhaps he is in ecstasy, because it's not often that we hear him praying aloud. He thanks his Father that even though most of the wise and learned members of his community tend to reject his teachings, the little ones; i.e., the ordinary people who bear the stresses of everyday life) are beginning to believe in him. He says take my yoke; i.e., accept the teaching and discipline that he lays on our shoulders and you will feel his help.

Fifteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 16, 2017

INTRODUCTION (*Isaiah 55,10-11; Romans 8,18-23; Matthew 13,1-9 or 1-23*) In today's first reading, the prophet is speaking to God's captive people in Babylon (Iraq). After 50 years God began telling them, through the prophet, that their years of captivity and slavery to the Babylonians would soon be ended. They would be able to return to Israel, to their cities, their homes and their farms. Many doubted this could be true. In today's passage God is assuring them that he will keep his promise. God compares his word to the rain and the snow that have the power to keep the world green and alive. Indeed it came to be so; God's word was true as roughly 50 years after the exile, the Persians (Iran) destroyed the Babylonian empire and allowed the Jews to return home. In today's gospel parable, we are presented with another way of thinking of the power of the word of God: when Jesus compares God's word to a seed.

HOMILY We can have many reactions to today's parable. We can imagine we are the good soil. We do everything right, we come to Church, we pray. We can think of lots of people who are not as good as we are. On the other hand, this parable might trigger a bout of self-blame when we think of all our faults and why we are making little or no progress in our Christian life.

There are other ways to interpret this parable. Without mentioning all the ways by which it can be understood, I will give one other interpretation which scholars believe is the way Jesus meant it to be interpreted when he spoke it. It is to look on it like a farmer might. The farmer threw the seed in every direction. The seed stands for God's word and Jesus' teachings. There were lots of reasons why some of the seed did not take root or, if it did, it did not survive. A farmer would know that a normal harvest would produce about seven-fold and a good harvest would produce about 10-fold. For the harvest to be greater than that, a miracle would be needed. Jesus tells us what did fall on good ground produced 30 or 60 or 100-fold. Basically, Jesus is telling us that

his word, even though it created problems for some people or was not productive for others, would produce abundantly. His word would have power like the rain and snow. Nothing could prevent God's word from taking hold.

That is a much more positive way of looking at the parable of the sower. When we look at the world today, with all its problems, we can get quite discouraged. Jesus is telling us God's kingdom will emerge triumphant in the end (and we want to share in his victory and that's all good). God's kingdom has always had to struggle, but it will continue to grow. Jesus could see his preaching and teaching ministry would thrive in spite of all the forces against it. Jesus might well have said to those who see only doom and gloom, "O you of little faith." The prophet Habakkuk had the right attitude when he prayed, "for though the fig tree blossom not nor fruit be on the vines, though the yield of the olive fail and the terraces produce no nourishment, though the flocks disappear from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord and exult in my saving God."

Sixteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 23, 2017

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today is from the book of Wisdom, a book of the bible written about 100 years before Christ. At the time, the Greeks were trying to force the Jews to give up their faith and believe what the Greeks believed. As a consequence, many Jews were giving up their belief in God and were becoming pagans. The author of this book is struggling with the question: "why is God allowing this evil to go on?" His conclusion is that God's way is not to destroy but, rather, to be patient and to lead people to repent. The theme prepares us for the gospel, which also deals with the problem of evil.

HOMILY: Today we hear a parable and, if I had read the long form, we would have heard an explanation of the parable, but the explanation doesn't closely fit the parable itself. I used the short form of the gospel so we could see the parable in what is considered to be its original form. Suffice it to say that most probably the explanation for the portion of the gospel I didn't read came from the time after the resurrection and it doesn't address the main point of the parable - which is patience.

Jesus is patient with sinners; he is patient with the Pharisees (for the most part). God is patient with the behavior of those who ignore his laws. He gives people time to reform their lives. (Sometimes we feel as if he's being too generous.) The time will eventually come when the good are separated from the evil (Matthew touches on this theme often). Apparently Matthew believes humans are not capable of making such judgments about who fits with which group, so he tells us God or the angels will be making the judgment of who belongs to those who will enter into eternal life or who will be with those who enter into eternal unhappiness. (Fire is constantly used in Matthew to describe the judgment to eternal misery.)

I think that when people envision the Last Judgment they think of it like a court room - where a person is judged and sentenced or acquitted and sent to either heaven or hell. It is not quite so simple. Actually we are all guilty; we are all sinners and are not worthy of eternal life. Redemption means that we recognize we are not worthy of God's grace, and we recognize God offers us a sharing in his life anyway through Jesus our redeemer. In this humble attitude, we respond to God's love with love and obedience on our part. Then God will bless his children far beyond what any of us can imagine.

You might be wondering if it is possible the weeds can turn into wheat? In our everyday world, wheat is always wheat and a weed is always a weed, but in a world where there are miracles, in the world of God, a weed can become wheat. That's why God is being patient; he waits for us to turn our lives over to him.

We really can't see into the heart of another, but if we see someone who seems to us that they need God in their life, pray for them, or possibly talk with them if they are receptive. That way we would be sharing in God's patience. If we don't get immediate results from our prayer, don't give up. It will be an opportunity for you to learn greater patience. I'll conclude with this thought: weeds require no labor. Gardening requires time and patience (and so do our spiritual lives).

Seventeenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 30, 2017

INTRODUCTION – (*1 Kings 3,5.7-12; Romans 8,28-30;Matthew 13,44-52*) When King David died, his son, Solomon, succeeded him as king of Israel. Today's first reading is Solomon's prayer as he begins his reign. He prayed for an understanding heart so that he could reign well. Just think, of all the possible gifts he could have asked for, he chose to ask for wisdom. Observance of God's commands will lead us to wisdom, thus in our psalm refrain we praise God for his commands and for the wisdom they impart to us.

HOMILY – Recently I heard a story about a woman who went shopping one day and in the process she ran into a store “for just a second.” She had a baby (her niece) with her and thought the baby would be all right for just a minute while she got what she needed. Of course, the little stop took more than a couple of minutes and the hot sun on this summer day really heated up the car. Accidentally, in her haste, she left the keys in the car. She panicked. All the doors were locked. Could she call AAA? If she had a hanger, maybe she could get the door open with it. Meanwhile the baby was looking worse. Fortunately, a man came driving by, saw the situation and took a tool to break a window so the baby could be saved. The aunt, who now had a broken car window, was not grateful. She didn't like that her window was broken. The man who broke the window said simply, “what was more important, the baby or the window?” It's a story that causes us to ask, “what's really important in our lives?”

The themes of today's parables are about hidden treasure and an exquisite pearl. I would like to comment on each of these. First the treasure. Political conditions and the constant threat of invading armies made burying one's treasure the best security a person could have and thus the most practical thing to do. The treasure probably would have been silver or gold coins and jewelry. It must have been quite a stash of treasure. The ethical nature of what he did is fuzzy because we don't know all the facts, but giving the finder the benefit of the doubt by presuming that the original owners of the treasure had passed on or had been captured, once the man who found the treasure bought the field, then, legally, he owned the treasure. And pearls were very popular at that time. One single pearl could be worth one's entire possessions, which is what the parable tells us.

The emphasis in both parables is on how the lucky finders responded to what they found. They knew the value of their find was greater than all their other possessions. Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of heaven is worth more than all we possess. Everything we possess has an expiration date stamped on it. God's kingdom, however, will last forever. Those who possess it know its value and are filled with joy when they find it.

Church history reveals that many believers have paid dearly to hold on to their faith. We call them martyrs. Most believers do not face martyrdom; they simply have to live the life of faith as Jesus taught. Not only does that assure us of eternal life to come, but it pays dividends in this world by offering us inner peace and joy and an overall fuller life during our time on earth. Research has shown that in general people who pray and go to Church and who keep the faith are better spouses, better parents, better member of the community; they enjoy better health, have a better attitude about the future and are better neighbors.

So, what's more important to you: the baby or the window?

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