

## 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

### Isaiah 55: 10-11

*The tone of this reading is quite joyful. The occasion for joy is the predicted return of captives from Babylon, citizens of Jerusalem and Judah taken hostage decades earlier when the Babylonians invaded Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. The captives have not yet been allowed to return, but things are looking up. From the wide-angle perspective of world history, the return of many of the captives from Babylon was of very small significance, the tiny drama of a tiny people, before which the story of their liberator, Cyrus of Persia, was of epic importance. The author of today's verses did not see things this way. History is not Cyrus' story, but God's. Cyrus conquers only because God has commanded it and chosen to send the people home.<sup>15</sup>*

**Thus says the Lord:** The cycle of precipitation and evaporation in the natural world provides a rich symbol to express the workings of God's word. The rain and snow do not fall on the earth and immediately return to the heavens. They fall to the earth for a purpose: to water the ground so that crops will grow producing fruit and seeds for future crops. In a similar way, God's word comes forth for a purpose. It is not spoken to people just to echo back to heaven. It comes to do God's will, and it is an effective word, achieving God's goals.<sup>1</sup>

**10**Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, Like the rain and snow, God's word must come down from heaven as God's *free* gift; it must not remain suspended in mid-air. A cloud formation can never slake the thirst of a scorched earth unless it descends like gentle rain. God's word is similar to rain. It must not remain in the sky to be admired or studied; it must soak the earth of man's heart and impart divine life to all the areas of human existence. The word must abide at the center of everything human—in the same way that rain is at the heart of all vegetation—re-vitalizing man's life and directing him along the way of God's loving purpose.<sup>4</sup>

**11**So shall my word be THE WORD OF GOD IS JESUS CHRIST.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 65) We refer to the Sacred Scripture as the word of God because it speaks of Christ and is fulfilled in Christ.<sup>(3)</sup> (CCC 134) We should also recognize that God is the author of Sacred Scripture.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 105) He inspired its human authors; He acts in them and by means of them.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 136) In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 104) In these 46 sacred books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New,<sup>3</sup> (CCC 120) the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 104) The Church has always venerated the Scripture as she venerates the Lord's Body, for both nourish and govern the whole Christian life.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 103) **that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will,** We hear the echo of this in John's doctrine of the Eucharist—the Word come down from heaven and received as bread.<sup>2</sup> **achieving the end for which I sent it.** God's word has a life of its own.<sup>13</sup> The end for which God sent it is to soften the arid land of human hearts, making them fertile places where God's will can germinate and bear fruit.<sup>14</sup>

### Romans 8:18-23

*To understand this selection, it helps to read the preceding verse as a kind of pick-up line: "But if we are children, we are heirs as well: heirs of God, heirs with Christ, IF ONLY WE SUFFER WITH HIM SO AS TO BE GLORIFIED WITH HIM." Paul contends that even our heaviest burdens of suffering are far outweighed by the glory that awaits us. Though the afflictions of our time on earth are inescapable, the Spirit helps to make them bearable. Suffering is all part of God's plan to mold us into the image of Christ.<sup>5</sup>*

## Brothers and sisters:

**18**I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. Compare costs to benefits: even our heaviest burdens of suffering are far outweighed by the glory that awaits us!<sup>5</sup> The glory that shall be manifested in us is the glory of divine Sonship. This will not be fully revealed until the end of time. Consider too that there is scarcely any suffering which may not become a source of blessing.<sup>8</sup> Three things persuade us of the greatness of this glory: the testimony of creation (vv 19-22), of believers (23-25), and of the Spirit (26-30).

**19**For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; This recalls Yahweh's promise to Noah of the covenant to be made "between myself and you and every living creature." (Gen 9:12-13) In longing for the showing forth of the glory of God's sons, nature is longing for its own freedom.<sup>8</sup>

**20**for creation was made subject to futility, Because it was made for Adam's use, all creation was affected by Original Sin: harmony with creation was broken, visible creation became alien and hostile to man and creation became subject to its bondage to decay.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 400) **not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it,** The futility to which creation is subject is not so much corruption and death as the disorder resulting from sin. According to God's plan material things should be resources, which enable man to attain the ultimate goal of his existence. By using them in a disordered way, disconnecting them from God, man turns them into instruments of sin, which therefore are subject to the consequences of sin.<sup>16</sup> God cursed the ground because of Adam's sin. (Gen 3:17) **in hope** The "hope" expresses not God's hope, but the hope given to creation itself by God Himself.<sup>2</sup> The creation suffered badly because of man and it became corruptible, but it has not been irreparably damaged. For it will become incorruptible once again for man's sake. This is the meaning of "in hope."<sup>12</sup>

**21**that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption This is a good time to look at the Church's teaching on our use of creation. The 7<sup>th</sup> commandment calls for respect for creation. Man's dominion is not absolute for it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come, and it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 2415) It is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals is morally acceptable if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 2417) It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly and it is unworthy to spend money on them that should go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 2418) **and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.** At the end of time, after the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul, and **THE UNIVERSE ITSELF WILL BE RENEWED.**<sup>3</sup> (CCC 1042) Sacred Scripture calls this transformation of humanity and the world, "new heavens and a new earth."<sup>3</sup> (CCC 1043)

**22**We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; The earth groans under the curse of Genesis 3:17. The passage shows that Adam's trespass had catastrophic consequences not only for himself, but for the world in which he lived. Paul hears creation crying out like a woman giving birth. The pangs of labor will not subside until the children of God are revealed and the whole material creation is renewed.<sup>5</sup> The world will then be restored to its **ORIGINAL** state.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 1047)

**23**and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, "firstfruits" is an agricultural term for the initial produce reaped at the beginning of the harvest season. We would expect the full harvest in heaven.<sup>5</sup> **we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.** Though we are already adopted and redeemed, we await the completion of the process at the

end of time.<sup>1</sup>

### **Matthew 13: 1-23**

*The day of the Parables took place in the Spring before Passover in the first year of his ministry. Today's selection is the beginning of the Parable Discourse. Many authorities consider "The Sower" to be the most important of the Gospel parables, as it is the most fundamental. It aimed to show that the Kingdom of Christ is spiritual, not material and worldly; and that it was not to appear suddenly in power and splendor, but would progress and develop by slow degrees, like seed sown in the ground.<sup>17</sup>*

**1**On that day, This refers to the day on which the preaching of Jesus included seven parables.<sup>10</sup> **Jesus went out of the house** The house is the place where Jesus was staying, probably the home of Peter.<sup>17</sup> **and sat down** This is the position of teacher and judge.<sup>9</sup> by the sea. It may be that by this time, Christ's followers had gotten to be so numerous that they wouldn't all fit into an indoor setting.<sup>12</sup>

**2**Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. There were no microphones so by getting into a boat, Jesus could be seen by all and the winds off the lake carried his words to the people.

**3**And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying:

**4**"A sower went out to sow. The farmer wore a sack or apron full of seed and he would take handfuls and strew it ahead of him in great sweeping movements of his hand. **And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up.** Despite the traditional title of the parable as "the sower", the real focus of the parable is the seeds and their yields.<sup>7</sup>

**5**Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep.  
**6**and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots.

**7**Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. Such bushes might be used to mark off the boundaries of a farmer's field and to keep animals from intruding. The image may be that of a farmer casting seed near the edge of his property.<sup>7</sup>

**8**But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirty-fold. A seven-fold increase was considered good, and tenfold was excellent. Jesus is suggesting an incredible harvest! Such a yield is highly unusual and is part of the extravagance of the parable.<sup>7</sup>

**9**Whoever has ears ought to hear." The people have a choice! The audience is to grasp the message that the response to the seed (the word of the kingdom) is mixed. But the result arising from the positive response will be abundant beyond all imagining.<sup>7</sup>

**10**The disciples approached him and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

**11**He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven This refers to the recognition that the Kingdom has become present in the ministry of Jesus, the Messiah.<sup>9</sup> **has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted.** Jesus speaks parables to the "great crowds" but explains them ONLY to his disciples. He invests his authority in the apostles (and their successors) to TRANSMIT GOD'S TRUTH THROUGH THEIR TEACHING.<sup>6</sup> According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the bishops, with the priests as co-workers, are authentic teachers of the apostolic faith endowed with the authority of Christ.<sup>3</sup> (CCC 888) Here Jesus has begun to teach the more complicated and difficult-to-grasp character of the Messianic Kingdom. The popular view was largely worldly and materialistic: the people and their leaders were thinking in terms of political freedom and national development. They would not accept the idea of a Messiah who would found a Kingdom in men's hearts and whose glory was to be achieved by humiliation, suffering and death.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>12</sup>To anyone who has, This is meant to show the increase in the value of the disciples' privileges and the loss experienced by those outside. Those to whom God has granted knowledge will get even more, whereas the others will lose even what little they have.<sup>7</sup> For the Jews, they are losing their position as the chosen people who have received the revelation of God.<sup>2</sup> Scott Hahn makes the distinction that it those Jews who do NOT recognize the fulfillment of the Old Covenant who will lose their position as the chosen people who have received the revelation of God.<sup>12</sup> *more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*

<sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables, because they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand. Matthew depicts Jesus as coming to the Jews with a ministry of teaching, preaching and healing. In addition, Jesus empowers and dispatches his twelve disciples to undertake an identical mission. But, in spite of such activity, the Jews on all sides reject Jesus as the Messiah and Bringer-of-the-Kingdom. In reaction to this, Jesus charges them with being a people that is deaf, blind and without understanding in regard to God's revelation to them and he lends substance to this charge by speaking to them, not openly as before, but in parables.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: *You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see.* In context, God commissioned Isaiah to preach judgment to the Israelites for their covenant infidelity. Similarly, Jesus uses parables to proclaim God's judgment on the faithlessness of his generation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and be converted, and I heal them. The Jews as a whole, by their willful non-observance of the Old Law had rendered themselves unworthy of the New Law.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>But (speaking to the apostles Jesus says) *blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear.*

<sup>17</sup>Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. The implication is that nothing inherent in the Jewish tradition earned them the privilege of seeing the things you are seeing: the prophets and these holy, godly people may well have been more meritorious but God reveals Himself not on the basis of human merit but by His own sovereign will. In this sense, since Jesus had to be born at a particular time and place, there necessarily had to be some to whom "it was given" and others to whom it was not.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Hear then the parable of the sower. The "sower" is primarily Jesus but also the apostles who will be taking the word to others.

<sup>19</sup>The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom. The interpretation shifts the original sense of the seed as the word of God and makes the seeds represent different people's response to the word. Everyone falls into one of the following four categories.<sup>18</sup> *without understanding it,* This doesn't signify intellectual comprehension, but the full acceptance of the gospel.<sup>12</sup> *and the evil one* This refers to the devil or Satan.<sup>7</sup> *comes and steals away what was sown in his heart.* This type of person does not understand because he does not love—not because he is not clever enough, but *lack of love* opens the door of the soul to the devil.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>20</sup>The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy.

<sup>21</sup>But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. These people are surprised and offended that anything in Christianity should be disagreeable to nature, disturbing to comforts, or difficult, forgetting that **THE CROSS IS THE WAY TO THE CROWN.**<sup>17</sup>

<sup>22</sup>The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of

riches choke the word Here we have the people whose heart is divided between God and the world. They are not generous enough to tear themselves away from the world and give undivided allegiance to God.<sup>8</sup> and it bears no fruit. “Fruit” is a common biblical image for the good works and faithfulness that flow from God’s grace.<sup>6</sup> It is very sobering to observe that three times out of four the seed does not come to fruition!<sup>9</sup> The parable was a warning to the early Christians to nurture the word and not to be led astray by the evil one, by persecution or by anxiety and riches.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>23</sup>But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.” The parable of the Sower illustrates how INDIFFERENT RESPONSES to the word of the kingdom prove unfruitful. Distractions come from the world, the flesh and the devil. On the other hand, fruit brought forth from the RESPONSIVE HEART abounds.<sup>6</sup> The preacher and the word are constants like the sower and the seed. The different effects which are produced are primarily due to the difference of dispositions with which it is heard or received. While there is an obligation of the clergy to preach the Gospel, there is also an obligation on the part of the faithful to HEAR the Gospel preached! They are bound to listen to it with reverence and take it to heart and make it the standard of their lives.<sup>8</sup> Despite all obstacles, the word of God *will* bear fruit and will do so in amazing abundance. The parable clearly reflects Jesus’ own experience: the obstacles to his ministry are legion, but the fruits of his labor will become bountiful beyond comprehension.<sup>13</sup>

*Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1999” by Lawrence E. Mick, (2) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (3) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church,” (4) “The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66” by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (5) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (6) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (7) “The Gospel of Matthew” by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (8) “The Sunday Epistles And Gospels” by Monsignor Patrick Boylan, (9) “Fire Of Mercy, Heart Of The Word” by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, (10) “The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew,” (11) “The Parables in the Gospels” by John Drury, (12) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (13) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: Year A” by Aelred R. Rosser, (14) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: Year A” by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, (15) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: Year A” by James L. Weaver, (16) “The Navarre Bible: Romans And Galatians,” (17) “The Parables Of Christ” by Charles J. Callan, O.P., and (18) “Jewish New Testament Commentary” by David H. Stern.*

*In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.*