**PARABLE OF THE SOWER St Luke 8:5-15**

 Today's parable of the sower presents us with four spiritual profiles or four distinct pictures of the human heart in its stance toward God and reminds us where and what we should be. It fits in very well with Christ's prayer for the Church which we have just read from John's Gospel, which is appointed for today's commemoration of the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The four profiles are extremely interesting and we can usefully apply them to ourselves, to remind ourselves of our calling, the presence of the evil one and the need to remain patient and watchful.

It is interesting at the outset to note that the Word of God is spoken to all four groups alike; it is only the reactions of the listeners which is different. In the first case the Lord says that “the devil comes and takes away the word (the seed) from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved”. In some parts of scripture, it is lamented that people will not hear the Word unless they have someone to preach good news to them. “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news,” is St Paul’s words quoting the prophet Isaiah. But in the same letter to the Romans it is implied that God manifests himself in some way to all people and not just in the physical creation but in a deeper way. But something or somebody is acting to take away the Word. This encounter in the heart is at the basis of our spiritual experience. Christianity is not just setting out to instill in us a moral discipline, though it would indeed be an enormous achievement if it could do that, but rather to bring God into our heart, which is the dwelling place in man reserved for him, where we can know him only partly in this earthly life as a foretaste of seeing him face to face after death. “Now we see as through a glass darkly but then face to face.” We have all doubtless had some experience of this; otherwise we would not be here today offering this sacrifice for the whole world as we say regularly in the prayer after the epiclesis. We have had a glimpse of something so utterly beautiful, so necessary for our souls that we are driven to pray for the salvation of the whole world, for the good and the evil. This experience of grace, of being in God's presence for however short a time, can be removed from us for a number of reasons. It may be our own fault. It may be something which we have put between God and ourselves to block him out temporarily or more permanently. This is usually called ‘sin’ for which the Church appoints repentance for our salvation as a constant remedy. It requires us to examine ourselves and see if we have done anything wrong in a single action to distance ourselves from God or whether we have allowed ourselves to settle into a pattern of life which damages our relationship in a slow but equally pervasive way, as for example in a marriage where things can go wrong in an almost imperceptible way.

The parable reminds us of some of these dangers, spiritual blindness where we think we see but we clearly do not. We simply do not recognise God speaking to us. We become impervious to him because we wish to see something else, something more in line with our own thinking, our own predilections. All this requires a change in direction, a metanoia or repentance. How fortunate are those who receive that gift.

In the second case in the parable where the seed springs up suddenly but soon dies, we do not have the maturity, the character, the love to resist temptation and our first joy gives way to despair and lack of faith. Now this particular temptation is important for us to recognise. As part of our spiritual journey, there will come a time when God will deliberately withdraw from us. It is a well attested experience in the lives of the saints and especially in that of the founder of monasticism. When St Antony the Great had exhausted all his human and spiritual resources and was close to death after his terrible temptations, only then did Christ appear to him. I pray that it will not be so severe for any of us here but we will certainly have a comparable experience of losing God, of crying out in desperation that we cannot see him, that he has deserted us and that he no longer cares for us. All this is very familiar from the psalms, and the story of the long-suffering Job in the Old Testament. But at the end of today's parable we are told that the Word of God grows in those "who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and “good heart". The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of those who have faith and patience inheriting the promises. In terms of actual time, it is noteworthy that, after his conversion, Paul says that he went into Arabia for three years and then it was another fifteen years before he went up to Jerusalem again. Our Lord himself spent thirty years preparing for a three-year ministry. So human timing is confounded in the spiritual life but what we must do is develop a trust and a maturity which knows God’s faithfulness and deep love for us and moreover binds us together as a spiritual body.

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The seed that fell among thorns is also one of the most powerful temptations. How misguided and how unsuccessful have been the Soviet and other communist regimes in trying to destroy the Church of God and replace man’s spiritual nature with Marxist dialectic and its materialistic approach to the world. Materialism patently kills the spirit whereas deprivation or fasting often kindle the warmth within as St Seraphim counselled. Modern materialist society has been far more efficient than its predecessors in achieving this by reducing us to ‘consumers’

The Fathers of the Church and of the Seventh Ecumenical Council entered into these experiences in a much deeper way than us and begged to see more of the divine light and inner warmth. As we enter into Christ’s prayer today and ask that we "be kept in the Father's name, that we may be one and that our joy may be fulfilled ", let us specifically ask also for the prayers of those Fathers, not only that we should be kept from the evil one but steadfast in the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ to whom be glory in the Church, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen. ***Oxford 13th October 2024***