

HOMILY SUNDAY 15-A (Homily 02)
“The Sustaining and Healing Word of God”
(Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65; Romans 8:18-23; Mt 13:1-23)

An old joke fits the reading today. A Protestant pastor, a Jewish rabbi and a Catholic priest were discussing how to get rid of bats in their bell towers. The pastor and rabbi had tried poisonous bait and trapping them in vain, but none of that worked. The priest, on the other hand, had some success – he just baptized and confirmed them and never saw them again!

Within the striking image or parable of the Word of God today as a seed, and the response or lack of response to that seed, two aspects emerge that demand our attention, and that is the power of God’s Word to sustain and to heal.

Before exploring those two dynamics, however, let us appreciate the image of the Word as a seed. Isaiah in the first reading reminds us of the power of God’s Word as a seed planted in the world. It goes out like rain or snow that nourishes the earth and does not return empty handed.

Isaiah is very positive and optimistic. The parable of the Sower shared by Jesus balances that view somewhat. There are different responses to God’s Word typified by the four types of soil. The seed that falls on the path does not take root at all; the seed that falls on rocky soil does take root but only in a superficial manner; the seed that falls on thorny soil takes roots and experiences some growth, but does not last. The seed that falls on rich soil, on the other hand, takes roots, grows, is long-lasting and bears fruit.

We can all identify with these types of soil. Perhaps we have been all four, or we know of someone who fits one or the other description. For the sake of illustration, we can use persons who attend a faith event such as a Cursillo. Some persons who really could benefit from the experience refuse to go at all – they are the hard soil of a path, without roots. Some go and enjoy the experience, but nothing changes in their lives when they return home – they are the rocky soil with only superficial roots. Others go, enjoy the experience, attend a few follow-up meetings after they return home, come back to church for a few Sundays, then disappear – they are the thorny soil that takes root, grows a little, but that does not last. Finally, there are those who take the Cursillo, benefit from it greatly, strive to live their commitment to the Fourth day, help organize and carry out other such events, and actively share their experience with others, They are truly rich soil – taking root, growing, and

bearing fruit that others can see and use for themselves.

It is rather disturbing that, in spite of all that has been taught and written officially by the Church on the importance of the Word of God, some Catholics seem to have never heard such teaching, and the bible remains undervalued and little used. Even whole communities can be poor soil. One missionary who went into a remote Catholic community as a language learner was struck by the sacraments-only nature of the ministry that was being carried out in that mission.

People had little preparation for the sacraments that they all demanded. They lit a candle and made pledges to try to stop drinking, but that seemed to be the extent of the pastoral activity. Looking around, he found no bibles in the rectory. At the same time, an evangelical preacher had flown into the community and was trying to convince the community members to welcome *his* church, as they would bring the people the Word of God. How sad that such a situation would exist in this day and age.

The Bible is our book, the book of the Church. It has come down to us through the ages within the Church. It is high time that we reclaim what is truly ours for all humanity, and begin to promote and treasure the Word of God in our families and in our daily lives.

Now to turn to the two other dynamics that emerge from the readings today – the power of the Word of God to sustain and to heal.

In the second reading, St. Paul reminds the Romans, and us, that there is a role for suffering in our lives. That suffering can be redemptive and have great value if it is informed by the Word of God. That Word provides encouragement, strength and support needed to suffer from life's vicissitudes for the sake of the name of Jesus.

An example from nature and from gardening will illustrate. It is important that plants in a garden do not have too much water. What happens when that occurs is that the plants will just keep on growing and never produce their desired seed or fruit. It seems that plants need a little adversity, a little drought at times, to trick them into thinking that they might not survive, and then they naturally begin to produce their seed or fruit in abundance. So to soak the garden once in a while is good, but to over-do it is to actually prevent the garden from reaching its potential and producing the fruit it is intended to produce.

That is the role of redemptive suffering in our lives. When life is too easy, when

everything goes our way, we can become complacent and lazy, and start to coast or even to backslide when it comes to practicing our faith. There is nothing like a little adversity to prod us into sinking deeper roots of faith, helped especially by turning to God's Word.

The second aspect of these two dynamics in the readings today, is the power of God's Word to heal. Jesus just manages to sneak this aspect into the Gospel almost in a casual way, when he complains that people will "shut their eyes so that they will not see, and their ears so that they will not listen and understand with the heart and turn – and I would heal them."

As the first reading affirmed, the Word of God is alive and active, and does produce healing and great fruit in those who believe. That healing may happen in very quiet, personal and spiritual ways, but it does happen.

One participant on a thirty day retreat was encouraged by the retreat master to pray for all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and took those words to heart. He went out, sat under an evergreen tree, and prayed sincerely for that intention for over an hour. That hour, however, was one of the driest experiences of prayer that he had ever undergone. He was impatient, restless, wanting to move, distracted with all kinds of thoughts and emotions. It felt like anything but prayer, and in the end, he felt frustrated, disappointed, because nothing seemed to have happened.

As he was sitting there dejectedly, he noticed a spider's thread hanging right in front of his nose, glistening in the sun. Depending on the breeze, it would disappear and then appear again. Suddenly, he heard words inside his head, and not through his ears, which said, "My grace is as fine as a spider's thread. It is always there – but not always visible." Mortified, he realized that his prayer was answered after all, just not the way he expected. This experience healed him of some impatience and strengthened his faith in God's power to work in the ordinary events of his life, an experience that sustains him to this day.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is first of all a feast on God's Word at the table of the Word. Scripture then also permeates the rest of the Eucharist, from the preface, through the canon of the mass that is prayed, to the closing blessing.

As St. Paul reminds us in the second reading, the Word of God has given us the first fruits of the Spirit. Those are gifts of the Spirit such as faith, hope, love, peace, joy and freedom from anger, negativity and addictions in our lives. Today we are encouraged to renew our love for the word of God, and to strive to be good soil for

the seed of God's word to bear fruit in our lives a hundred-fold.