



Archbishop of Montreal

Homily
Sunday, July 12, 2020

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (Mt 13:1-23)

How is it possible that God still wants to reach out to me?

Do you fear the Word of God? What are our fears before God, before the Word of the Lord? One of our fears could be for instance that “I feel I am unworthy to hear the Word of the Lord! One day I believed, one day I prayed, but I distanced myself from God, I distanced myself from the commandments of the Lord, and why would God still want me anyway? How is it possible that God still wants to reach out to me?”

When Jesus speaks about the parable of the sower and when he speaks of different types of land, he uses an analogy because normally a farmer would not sow the seeds on the road, on rocky ground, or among the thorns. He must first prepare the land and then he will sow there where the land has been prepared.

But in this parable of the sower, Jesus plants seeds everywhere, at random! On the road, on the side of the road, among the thorns. And finally, also in the good soil! He sows everywhere. He sends his Word everywhere. He addresses everyone’s heart. He speaks to every person, in all stations of life, to every life’s history, in all its complexities. He really knocks on every door of every human heart, regardless of how hardened that heart may be, regardless of how God may be forgotten by it, regardless of how far God is distanced in the life of that person.

Jesus never ceases to come to us with his mercy. He always offers his word, He offers his salvation, as well as God’s forgiveness. He never ceases to offer God’s life, as well as eternal life. He always offers himself to every person. We do not need to worry or fear of being too far away from God or to be distanced from Him.

Jesus never stops from coming to meet us. He comes to us even before we reach out to him. As St. John or St. Peter said, “God loved us first”. He loved us even before we were ready to receive him. He gives himself to us and lives within us. And finally, it is God himself who prepares us to receive him.

Like the farmer, the labourer will work his land, he will prepare the soil, even if it is rocky. He will prepare it to receive the seeds. So, God does more than just sow the Word, which is Jesus. And Jesus does more than just give us his Word, Jesus does more than just sowing his Word in what would be good soil, in what would be the hearts already prepared to receive him. He prepares the soil, and he prepares the hearts. He prepares us to receive him.

He gives himself to us when we are ready to receive him, but he also gives himself to us when we are not ready. In this case, he gives himself to us to prepare us to receive Him. He is the one who comes to prepare our hearts. He is the one who comes to open our hearts to his Word.

So, if we fear of being too far away from him or if we have neglected him for too many years, for a long period of time, and if we would think deep down that it is too late to return to him, let us remind ourselves that no, it is never too late!

Another fear we may dread is what God might ask of us. We want God, for sure! We want to pray, of course, but we also hope there are certain things God will not ask of us. Oh yes, we all want God to be present in our life, but we also want to keep Him at a certain distance.

You surely know the expression which states that “There is none so deaf as those who will not hear.” So, there are times when we would be ready to hear things from God but at other times, we are not ready. Because often, in fact, things are not black and white, not all or nothing.

We really like to hear about some things. For example, we like to hear of mercy, especially the mercy of God. Wouldn't we also like to hear of his forgiveness? We very much like to hear about God's forgiveness! But perhaps we do not like to hear about his commandments. Perhaps we do not like to be reminded that we must also forgive. When it is about God pardoning us, we like to hear it. But being told to forgive others, we are in no hurry to pay attention, we are not at all quick to forgive, not ready to hear the call to forgive. Forgiveness is a gift that goes further, giving twice as much, and we are probably not ready to go there, yet.

So, am I afraid of what God could be asking of me? Probably yes, because I know that it could have something to do with my vocation. Am I, ultimately, afraid to hear God's call? My plan for life is worked out, my project is set, and every step of my career is planned right up to retirement. I do not want God to interfere with this! Am I ready to hear the call of God, what-ever it is? Being afraid to hear the call of God when it is about our vocation is quite normal. We should not be surprised about this.

Take the example of the vocation to marriage! So many people hesitate to commit them-selves. They surely want to live as a couple, they want to establish a family, but the idea of getting married, giving oneself permanently to another, for life, is an altogether different matter! One prefers to keep an exit strategy!

Furthermore, in one way or the other, one might not feel ready to hear this call of radical self-giving, not ready to respond to the call to consecrated life as a priest.

Then there is the whole matter of considering all that concerns leading a moral life, an ethical life and the whole question of Christian values. Most often, we are not quite ready to live a life of sharing, to answer a call to solidarity, a call to faithfulness, a call to Adoration, a call to prayer, a call to keep the Lord's Day and live it as the Lord's Day. These are some of the many things we may not want to hear. We may rather prefer to not hear them.

When Jesus speaks of fear in the Gospel, this is precisely the fear he speaks about: the fear of conversion. “I do not want to hear, I do not want to see, because I fear it will bring me to conversion or to live a conversion I prefer not to live.” Maybe I do not want to confront them because I am not ready to do this now. So, we put limits on things. It is for that reason that one does not want to hear the call from God to conversion.

On the other hand, it could be that if we have compartmentalized our life, and there are certain areas in our life where we are ready to hear the call of God. For example, we are ready to hear the call to help the poor. But then there are other areas where we would rather prefer not to hear God's call.

So what is my real fear, deep-down inside of me? What is my fear of the Word of God? Do I have trust in God? Do I have trust in his Word?

When we say, “I believe in God,” believing in God does not just mean we believe that God exists, even if this already is a lot! But believing in God means we have trust in God, it means that I am ready to put my life in his hands. I belong to God with all my heart. I open my heart to him and I give every part of my existence to him, I leave all my projects in his hands. I believe in God, I give myself to God.

In this way, we can also consider the question of why we are afraid of death! What are my fears related to death, what are my fears related to illness? We tend to run away from illness and death, just as we want to run away from pain and suffering. We are afraid of suffering!

What is God's call in my life? What is God's call when we are sick? What is God's call when we are confronted with death? Even in death, there is a call from God because God is present. God is present, God accompanies us, God speaks to us, God prepares us, God makes us capable to confront, God fortifies us, God pacifies us.

At the heart of today's Gospel is Jesus' speaking of those who do not hear because they do not want to hear, those who do not see because they do not want to see, because they fear conversion.

How does the Gospel continue? Jesus proclaims: "I will heal them." Jesus has the power to heal us from our fears. He has the power to heal our fears to hear his Word. He has the power to heal us from our fear to convert. He has the power to heal us from our hardness of heart, the hardness of the heart which closes it to conversion.

When the Bible speaks of a heart that is afraid of conversion, it speaks of hardness of heart. The rock is a symbol, so to speak, of a heart that is hardened. It follows that when Jesus speaks of sowing on rocky ground, he means in hardened hearts. He does it anyway, because he has the power to transform hearts of stone into hearts of tenderness. This is the faith of the Bible! And God has the power to transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

Hearing this parable of the sower and the different types of soil, a parable which we have known so long and heard so often, we ask ourselves, how do I fit into this text? Each one of us will probably say to himself, "Well, yes, I have problems, I am not perfect, but there must be at least some good soil in me."

But perhaps we should look at this question from another angle. Perhaps we should say, more fundamentally, "Well, this hardened heart is in me!" There probably are certain areas of hardness deep down in my heart. Some areas remain open, yes, areas of tenderness, yes, but there are also still areas of stone. Therefore, the hardened heart that Jesus refers to is probably mine!

The path, on which some of the seed mentioned by Jesus fell, could represent times when we were rather indifferent to God's Word, times during which we neglected to take the Word of God seriously enough, letting the Evil One stop the Word of God from reaching us. Somehow, the image of the path applies to us as well. We might have a forgetfulness of God, a forgetfulness of his Word, and a forgetfulness of his will.

Now we consider the other image used by Jesus, the one of the thorns representing life's worries, our being preoccupied with material well-being and anxieties, which may be legitimate. But we can let our concerns about health and wealth, as much as they are linked to our wellbeing, suffocate our life, take control of it, paralyze us and keep us from living our life and loving. Perhaps we can find some or all of this in ourselves. But Jesus comes to heal us!

Jesus mentions all these types of hearts, but he says, "I will heal them." Jesus has the power to heal all our forgetfulness of God, all hardness before God, and our anxieties which we have allowed to imprison us. Jesus has the power to heal us.

Let us ask God to give us not only His Word so that it yields fruits in us, fruits of goodness, fruits of beauty, fruits of justice, fruits of peace. Let us also ask him to be at work in our soil, to work on our hearts, to prepare us to receive his Word, which is the Word of Life, the Word of Salvation.

Among the fears we may have, we find one linked to the COVID-19 virus, as we are confronted with the pandemic and the fear of the unknown. The unknown always frightens. Sometimes, we would prefer to imagine to know what is coming, whereas in actual fact, it is impossible to know

what will happen. In this situation, the fear of the unknown can become an experience of abandonment, a time when we can turn to God. It can then further transform into a time of collaboration, a time of solidarity, a time of opening up to others. If we consider these things under the aspect of things to do or to avoid, what is asked of us now is to turn towards God in prayer. We are called to be in solidarity, to think that we are all in this together and that, by the grace of God, we will come out of this pandemic stronger than before.

Amongst the things that we should probably avoid in our lives, I want to emphasize one. We must avoid blame in the situation that we face or with the people who we meet. Blame does not help to move things forward. Blame does not help us to find solutions. Blame does not help us to grow in solidarity. Blame does not help us to open up to God, to abandon ourselves to him. Blame misleads us. Blame is like a veil in front of our eyes which prevents us from seeing the good, the truth, and the beauty in the heart of every human being.

All human beings have their frailties, but every human being is also created in the image of God and capable of beauty, truth, goodness, capable of being in community.

Therefore, I ask you not to let yourself be carried away by blame. For instance, do not blame the Chinese people because COVID supposedly coming from China. This makes no sense. On this topic, remember that the Spanish flu from long ago did not come from Spain! The first time we heard of the Spanish flu, we heard of what occurred in Spain. Maybe COVID comes from China, but it may also have come from elsewhere. What matters now is not to blame anyone.

It is the nature of the world we live in now, with its frailties and where viruses exist and spread easily. The question is how we can work together to protect ourselves and prevent the virus from spreading. In summary, blame should be avoided more than ever.

Likewise, there is the question of prevention measures. During this time of confinement, we have want to go fast, we want soon to go meet others, as we missed them for so long. Of course, there are nice things on television, nice things on screens, and all is well with physical distancing, but the nature of human beings is made for physical human contact! A human being is made to meet others! A human being is a person, a being made to be loved, body and soul! Clearly, nothing can compensate or replace this.

Some suffering remains with us, some suffering remains. It is not easy to say “yes” to it. It is not easy to say “yes” to physical distancing. It is clear that this time of trial continues. But, in prayer and solidarity, we can walk together and encourage each other. We will grow through this.

Some suffering remains with us, some suffering remains. It is not easy to say “yes” to it. It is not easy to say “yes” to physical distancing, even now when we are no longer separated from one another. It is not easy to say “yes” to wearing masks and not seeing the faces of our relatives and their smiles. And it is clear that this time of trial continues. But, in prayer and solidarity, we can walk together and encourage each other. And, I repeat, in a way, we will grow through this.

There are so many things that happen deep in our hearts. It is just like the tip of an iceberg. We only see its tip, but we do not see all that is underneath. Nowadays, thanks to television and radio, but also thanks to the social media and the Internet, we can see many more things. But, at the same time, there are many things we do not see.

For example, we do not see all that God does in our hearts. We do not see the suffering present in hearts, just as we do not see what God does in the heart of every human being. Humanity is at standstill. God is at work in every heart.

God alone, as I said already but cannot repeat enough, God alone can make himself close to each one of us everywhere in the world! With God, there is no social distancing. The only

distance from God is the one we impose on ourselves. God wants to embrace us how we are, what we are, or where we are. He comes to visit us when no one else can come to us.

I wish for us that this pandemic will be a time of renewal and openness to God, both on a personal level and as families. This will also be seen in our church. Sometimes, we go ahead with our own plans and think we are doing God's will, but we don't always ask ourselves whether it is really God's plan that we are following!

This idea can also be carried into our place in society. In an increasingly secular society, with the laïcisme of our society, we must stress that we are created by God and are called to eternal life. We must find again a space for God in society, a space for faith, a space for those who believe.

Let us pray to the Lord that together, personally, individually, in our families, as a Church, and as a society, we will grow through this pandemic.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Christian Lépine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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