

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Thus says the Lord:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the one who eats,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”



Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans.

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Brothers and sisters:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time
are not worth comparing with the glory
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For the creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the children of God;
for the creation was subjected to futility,
not of its own will
but by the will of the one who subjected it,
in hope that the creation itself
will be set free from its bondage to decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation
has been groaning in labour pains until now;
and not only the creation,
but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for adoption to sonship,
the redemption of our bodies.

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GOSPEL READING – A 15

The Lord be with you.

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some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.
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The creation, Paul says, was thus subjected, “not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ...” Most commentators identify “the one” here with God, but some refer it to Adam. In the latter case, Adam, through his fall, dragged down the whole created universe with him.

Some commentators (so NRSV) would remove the semicolon after “hope” and translate the word *hoti* as “that” instead of “because.” The whole sentence could then be paraphrased: “the creation was subjected to futility, not because of any wrong it had done itself but by the [disobedience] of Adam, who thereby dragged it down into subjection. But there was still a hope of its ultimate liberation.”

Where did this hope come from? It must lie, not in Gen 3, but in the apocalyptic expectation of a new heaven and a new earth. So the whole creation waits with eager longing.

Just as its fall, its state of corruption and decay, was the consequence of the human Fall, so the hope of its redemption is bound up with human redemption.

Its longing, therefore, is for the redemption of humanity, for the “revealing of the children of God” (Rom 8:19), for the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:23).

Now, this longing has been given substance—believers, as a result of Christ’s finished work of redemption, have the first fruits of the Spirit. In them the process of redemption, for which the whole creation yearned, has already been initiated.

But meanwhile they have to live in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet,” and therefore they too still share the groaning of the whole Creation. (With some ancient manuscripts, we omit “adoption as children” in Rom 8:23, for elsewhere Paul regards adoption as a present reality [Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5]. At the moment their adoption is hidden, visible only to faith; but it will be revealed for what it is at the end, not brought into being only then for the first time [Rom 8:19; also 1 John 3:2].)

This picture of the unity between human destiny and the destiny of the universe is magnificent, but is it tenable? Certainly there are mythological elements in it—for example, it depends upon a literal acceptance of the story of the Fall and of the cursing of the ground as its consequence.

Is the perishability and decay of the universe really a consequence of human sin? And does human redemption lead to the redemption of the universe from this decay?

This much we may affirm: as a result of the disturbance of the divine-human relationship, the relationship of human beings not only to one another but to the whole created order is disturbed. People either deify nature (pantheism, romanticism) or they treat it with contempt (pollution!).

When the relationship of human beings to God is restored, then not only is their relation to one another rectified as in the sacramental community, but they also recover their harmony with the created order. This much of truth we can discern in Paul’s daring picture.

Western thought, especially since the Reformation, has tended to concentrate upon the salvation of the individual; our passage is a powerful reminder of the cosmic dimension of redemption.

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23

The short form of the gospel substantially represents the parable of the Sower as originally told by Jesus. The discussion about the purpose of parabolic teaching (Mt 13:13-17) and the allegorical interpretation of the sower (Mt 13:18-23) are later interpretive additions. Most, though not all, New Testament scholars would agree that this is so.

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To understand the short form, we must entirely disabuse our minds of the allegorical interpretation and look at the total impression the story creates. What we see is a tremendous harvest, despite the loss of some of the seed.

The climax comes at the end and, as so often in Jesus' parables, contains an element of deliberate absurdity—a hundredfold yield is fantastic, the usual yield being in the neighborhood of seven and a half, with ten as an outside possibility. The point of the parable is miraculous success in spite of apparent frustration.

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Pause – and look up at the assembly

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Paul is not a romantic nature worshiper but a realist who recognizes “nature red in tooth and claw.” He attributes this lamentable state of affairs to Adam’s fall. The basis for this assertion lies in Gen 3:17, where the ground is cursed because of Adam’s sin.

The creation, Paul says, was thus subjected, “not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ...” Most commentators identify “the one” here with God, but some refer it to Adam. In the latter case, Adam, through his fall, dragged down the whole created universe with him.

Some commentators (so NRSV) would remove the semicolon after “hope” and translate the word *hoti* as “that” instead of “because.” The whole sentence could then be paraphrased: “the creation was subjected to futility, not because of any wrong it had done itself but by the [disobedience] of Adam, who thereby dragged it down into subjection. But there was still a hope of its ultimate liberation.”

Where did this hope come from? It must lie, not in Gen 3, but in the apocalyptic expectation of a new heaven and a new earth. So the whole creation waits with eager longing.

Just as its fall, its state of corruption and decay, was the consequence of the human Fall, so the hope of its redemption is bound up with human redemption.

Its longing, therefore, is for the redemption of humanity, for the “revealing of the children of God” (Rom 8:19), for the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:23).

Now, this longing has been given substance—believers, as a result of Christ’s finished work of redemption, have the first fruits of the Spirit. In them the process of redemption, for which the whole creation yearned, has already been initiated.

But meanwhile they have to live in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet,” and therefore they too still share the groaning of the whole Creation. (With some ancient manuscripts, we omit “adoption as children” in Rom 8:23, for elsewhere Paul regards adoption as a present reality [Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5]. At the moment their adoption is hidden, visible only to faith; but it will be revealed for what it is at the end, not brought into being only then for the first time [Rom 8:19; also 1 John 3:2].)

This picture of the unity between human destiny and the destiny of the universe is magnificent, but is it tenable? Certainly there are mythological elements in it—for example, it depends upon a literal acceptance of the story of the Fall and of the cursing of the ground as its consequence.

Is the perishability and decay of the universe really a consequence of human sin? And does human redemption lead to the redemption of the universe from this decay?

This much we may affirm: as a result of the disturbance of the divine-human relationship, the relationship of human beings not only to one another but to the whole created order is disturbed. People either deify nature (pantheism, romanticism) or they treat it with contempt (pollution!).

When the relationship of human beings to God is restored, then not only is their relation to one another rectified as in the sacramental community, but they also recover their harmony with the created order. This much of truth we can discern in Paul’s daring picture.

Western thought, especially since the Reformation, has tended to concentrate upon the salvation of the individual; our passage is a powerful reminder of the cosmic dimension of redemption.

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23

The short form of the gospel substantially represents the parable of the Sower as originally told by Jesus. The discussion about the purpose of parabolic teaching (Mt 13:13-17) and the allegorical interpretation of the sower (Mt 13:18-23) are later interpretive additions. Most, though not all, New Testament scholars would agree that this is so.

The arguments for this position have been vindicated by the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, which has the parable without any interpretation. That being the case, the short form offers an opportunity to deal with the original interpretation intended by Jesus.

To understand the short form, we must entirely disabuse our minds of the allegorical interpretation and look at the total impression the story creates. What we see is a tremendous harvest, despite the loss of some of the seed.

The climax comes at the end and, as so often in Jesus' parables, contains an element of deliberate absurdity—a hundredfold yield is fantastic, the usual yield being in the neighborhood of seven and a half, with ten as an outside possibility. The point of the parable is miraculous success in spite of apparent frustration.

But this is not a general lesson; it bears quite concretely upon the situation of Jesus and his hearers. There was much frustration in Jesus' ministry. Only a few followed him. He encountered much hostility from the authorities of his day. He was misunderstood by the crowds. Even some of his closest followers left when he deliberately broke with the crowds (John 6:66). Jesus is confident, nevertheless, that his ministry will result in the eventual triumph of God's kingdom.

The allegorical interpretation (Mt 13:18-23) adapts the parable to a missionary situation, most likely that of the Greek-speaking church prior to Mark. It warns new converts of the perils that beset the life of discipleship and urges upon them the need for perseverance.

The central portion on the purpose of parabolic teaching appears to have been first inserted at this position by Mark, although it represents earlier tradition and is possibly an authentic saying of Jesus. It referred originally, not to the teaching in parables, but quite generally to the kingdom of God mysteriously present in the words and works of Jesus.

Mark constructs a theory of his own about parabolic teaching. He holds that parables were told deliberately to create misunderstanding and to mystify the hearers, producing hardness of heart and unfaith.

The parables are riddles to outsiders, and their meaning is entrusted to an inner group of disciples, who will be able to make the meaning plain only after the resurrection.

This is all part of Mark's messianic secret. Only after Jesus' death and resurrection can his messiahship be safely proclaimed; during his earthly life it remains a mystery.

This was not a piece of abstract theologizing, but Mark's answer to a christology that overemphasized the miracles of Jesus and minimized the Cross.

Matthew has taken over the parable and its allegorical interpretation from Mark without any substantial changes. But he has introduced considerable changes into the central section, and this is obviously the most important part to study if we are following the longer form of the gospel. Matthew makes the following major alterations:

(1) Mt 13:11: Instead of Mark's "to you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God," Matthew has: "To you it has been given to know the secrets. ..." The fact that Luke has the same wording suggests that both evangelists are following a second, non-Markan source at this point.

(2) Mt 13:12: Matthew adds this from Mark 4:25.

(3) Verse 13: Matthew alters Mark's scandalous *hina* ("in order that") to *hoti* ("because").

(4) Mt 13:14-15: Our present text includes a citation from Isa 6, which was already alluded to in verse 13. There is a growing opinion among scholars that this is a post-Matthean addition to the text.

(5) Mt 13:16-17: "Blessed are your eyes" from Q (par. Luke 10:23-24).

To get at Matthew's theology, we will ignore the fourth point and concentrate on the other points. Matthew has edited this section to bring out two antithetical points: (a) the disciples (that is, the church) are the bearers of the new revelation, hoped for by the Old Testament worthies and now fulfilled (Mt 13:17), and will be rewarded at the End; (b) the old Israel has rejected the new revelation and will be rejected at the End.

The motivation behind these redactional changes comes from Matthew's own situation. The mission to Israel has finally failed, leading to a debate between the church and the synagogue over which is the true people of God.

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