

The Parable of the Sower

In the form of the Mass which I endured as a little child, the first dialogue between priest and server (my then condition) was drawn from Ps 42, as the priest said

Introibo ad altare Dei

and I replied

ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meum

It occurred to me many years later that the phrase which had so often stuttered from my lips as an infant would serve well as a motto for a priest's ministry: *Iuventutem Laetare*. It pleases me to find the verb *laetare* used transitively: God does not just *rejoice in* our youthfulness, he is the one who *fills it with joy*.

I'm using the word *youthfulness* intentionally, and appropriating it for myself without vanity. Outside the bakery in Castellina in Chianti is a picture of three abandoned dogs, and the legend *noi dobbiamo restare fuori* (we must stay outside). I've absorbed the truth that in the Kingdom of Heaven there are only children, and those who aren't children must stay outside. So I try to preserve everything that's left to me of the childlike, hoping to be let in at last. *To fill youthfulness with joy* is God's work; and I think a priest's work must be to imitate God. It's always been a privilege to lift up a young person who has been defeated or refused or otherwise abused, and send him or her away happy. The chaplain's office acquired a lot of home comforts shortly after I got here, so that this holy work could be accomplished. I'm glad to say that a lot of tears have been shed and dried on our sofa, and a lot of smiles have been restored.

Of course, the youthfulness of undergraduates isn't the only sort. We have a parishioner who makes it to Mass most days, with the help of her friends. She won't see her ninetieth year again, but Tess is just a girl, and one sees the young person she really is breaking through the arthritis and the sheer weariness she has to cope with. I collect and treasure my memories of outwardly aged people who still laugh like the babies they've given birth to, and enjoy the fun of being alive. They make my heart rise when it is down, and I can see that God has given grace.

There's a phrase in the middle reading today that I wanted to look at. Paul is speaking of the frustration of the cosmos, its inability to achieve its own fulfilment; under this frustration every one of us struggles and groans. He surprisingly says that this frustration proceeds, not from any exercise of will on our part, but from the decision of God, who imposed this inability on what he had made. Paul is ignoring an opportunity to hang more weight on our consciences. In fact he manages a great liberation: we fall short of our longing and our true destiny because of a divine decree, not for our own misdeeds. In this context we are called to join in a cosmic process of giving birth; our sufferings are birth-pangs, the universe is in labour.

Labour, of course, is bitter and agonising: but it brings forth absolute youthfulness, the indispensable condition for heavenly life. It was Jesus who spoke of a future where our suffering will be swept away by our joy that a new life has been born into the world. I believe that this is the context in which we can read the Parables of the Kingdom, which take up the incidents and details of the everyday, and weave them into the massive tapestry of the Redemption, which so slowly appears from the fingers of so much work and suffering, tears and struggle - with the gold of God's promises running through it as a constant theme.

The parable of the sower and his seed embodies a frustrating process, whose outward reality can so plainly be read as a defeat: there are the disastrous and incorrigible facts: you can watch with your own eyes the failure of three-quarters of his work, the loss of seventy-five percent of his store. It is quite enough to break the heart. But the opening sentence stands good: the sower *does* go out, and *does* sow the seed. And because of the quarter that falls into good soil, the harvest is sufficient, is even generously sufficient.

There is little about the *process* to indicate the fruitfulness to come; in Jewish thinking, the seed that is sown must die before it gives birth; and Jesus eagerly seized on this pattern, surely because he was feeling how his own life was already following it in detail. As he surrenders what he has, throwing it eloquently abroad to meet whatever fate it will, he is surrendering his own self, he is in training for the moment in the garden, when he will say

If I am the one you are seeking, take me, let these others go.

The image of the sower will reach in that moment its terminus, its true depth.

For love of the one to be born, the renewed humanity, the child that will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, we must make our lives as generous, and as unquestioning, as the sowing demands it should be.