

# Sunday Homily

## FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

5 JULY 2020

YEAR A

“...and learn from me....”

Matthew 11:29

### Illustration

Teaching has taken quite a lot of punishment in the past few years. New teaching methods are blamed for illiteracy rates. A lowering of respect for teachers by the media, and, consequently, some parents and children, has resulted in an increase in verbal and physical violence in the classroom. This is a depressing picture, which some researchers attempted to alleviate by asking a number of famous people for the names of any teacher who had inspired them.

A tidal wave of names was launched into the public eye. Apparently every person asked had the name of at least one or two teachers who had had such influence as to have changed, or certainly added to, their lives and futures. Sometimes it was their academic gifts, but it was more likely to have been their ability to inspire their pupils, to give them a special something which spurred them on to achieve their very best, even to reach heights previously unimagined. Think for a moment, who were your inspirational teachers?

### Gospel Teaching

No one can overestimate the influence of a good teacher. Even if we cannot remember a thing they actually taught us, good teachers will be remembered with fondness long after their words have been forgotten. That is because people are more important than words. Qualities like kindness and generosity are always more enduring than principles or rules, and integrity is more infectious than dogma.

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers himself as a teacher: “learn from me”, he says. At this point in his ministry Jesus has had to face up to being rejected by the religious hierarchy and “wise” people of his time. His message found no place in their hearts. Becoming experts in the Law had prevented them from recognising the coming of God's Messiah, the coming of God's kingdom.

Instead, Jesus found a ready audience among the people considered social outcasts. The tax collectors and sinners, those unable to keep the Law in all its rigour, all welcomed Christ's message and the hope it brought. Unfortunately, the experts were so preoccupied with keeping the externals of the Law that they

had largely lost sight of its purpose, to lead people to God. They were no longer open to hearing the word of God, because they did not need it. They placed the Law above every other consideration, even above people. The Law had become an end in itself.

Jesus offered a different “yoke”, a simpler one. We do not have to worry about hundreds of laws, or keeping the minutiae of rules and regulations. Jesus simply offers himself as the model to follow. He alone is the way to God. Follow him and we will find God. Like a good teacher, the lasting impression he makes resides more in who he is, than anything he says. He asks us to be like him, to be gentle and to acknowledge our need for God. It is only when, like the tax collectors and sinners, we are open to the words of God, only when we admit our dependence on God, that we are able to receive God’s mercy. And, like them, we experience God’s love and mercy, not by mindless obedience, but by meeting a person: Jesus, God’s own Son, face to face.

## Application

Jesus says that his burden is light. We can be burdened with all kinds of things: the opinions of the moral watchdogs who claim superior knowledge of God, telling others how to live, what to do and think, even when and how to pray. They forget that rules in religion are only useful to the extent that they lead us to God, to the love and freedom he offers. We have burdens from our consumerist society, the burdens of others’ unreasonable expectations and demands, overbearing parents, the demanding boss, the inquisitive neighbour. And then there is our own guilt, our low self-esteem, our unattainable goals. We can become overwhelmed by burdens.

Jesus’ yoke is easy. It is well fitting, tailor-made to the individual. Because the task he sets us is simple – be yourself! Be the person God wants you to be, using Jesus as your teacher. Be gentle, with yourself and others. Be humble, acknowledge your need for God, don’t assume you have to do it all by yourself. Resist becoming overburdened by any unreasonable demands. Resist any “system” or “rule book”. Simply get to know Jesus, the person. Learn from him and you will find rest.

# Sunday Homily

## FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

12 JULY 2020

YEAR A

“Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain”

Matthew 13:8

### Illustration

It is well known to those of us who grow things, whether in a window box, allotment, field or garden, that we need to nourish the soil in order for plants to flourish. We dose the small potted plant with liquid feed, we replenish the soil in our window box, we hump compost onto the allotment and fertilise the fields.

In ancient China, every vestige of household waste was carried up to those garden-sized fields that climbed up the hillside. What was taken out had to be replenished and the earth could not produce good crops unless it had sufficient depth and fertility. However good the quality of seed, a rich harvest cannot be achieved without good soil in which to sow it.

### Gospel Teaching

In Jesus' day sowing seed was haphazard. Weeds, most commonly a kind of thorn, were not cleared first, but ploughed into the ground. The paths through the fields became hard like roads, and seeds were scattered everywhere, on paths and edges and headlands where the underlying, predominantly limestone, rock came near the surface and made the soil very thin.

To his listeners Christ's description would have been instantly recognisable. He was illustrating his teaching with everyday events, through the language of work, of weather, of nature. Jesus knew that if he spoke in the dry language of the priests, of the Temple or synagogue, the people would not hear what he had to say. Jesus was a country boy and much of his teaching involved the use of symbols taken from nature; he spoke the people's own kind of language, and so they listened to him.

It is easy to become distracted when people speak in a way which does not relate to us, to our needs and our lives; to listen but not to absorb what is said, to miss the crucial heart of a message, which is what happened to many of Jesus' listeners. Some listened but did not want to know. Some heard but did not understand. Some listened and heard but were too frightened of the challenge to respond. Jesus prepared the ground in the way in which a person of the earth would do, with symbols which spoke to the experience and hearts of his listeners.

He valued each person in that crowd and when we value someone we take the trouble to approach them at their own level. The harvest of response we reap is worth every moment of effort.

## Application

And what of us? We frequently fail to listen to one another, let alone to Christ! We avert our eyes, use distracted sounds like, "Mmmm". Interrupting, not allowing others to finish. Do we really listen? How often do you telephone someone and know, by the noise in the background, that the television or radio is claiming half their attention? How often do we ask people how they are because of social convention rather than wanting the truth and the detail of their answer?

If someone listens to us attentively, we feel valued. When someone speaks to us in our own language it feeds and enhances the person that we are, making us grow in confidence and self-worth. This is how Christ listens to us and how we need to listen to him, not only in our prayers but as he speaks to us through others. By this caring we nurture the seed of his love which develops and grows into a part of his great harvest.

But if our soil is thin, what do we do? How do we compost it? By prayer, asking for enlightenment and wisdom; by a good deed, a kind word, sincere contrition for our weaknesses; not by heavy and self-congratulatory penances, but paying close attention to the ordinary events of our daily lives; by being fully present to each person, hearing his or her spoken and unspoken needs. Our compost involves facing and not avoiding life's unpalatable aspects for fear of them troubling us; it involves rising to the challenge of being fully human in the way which Jesus made transparently clear. This is the spiritual fertilisation given by God. When we accept it, it nourishes the life of God within us.

God is with us in the great and in the minute events of our lives. He speaks to us in gentle tones and in language we understand. Listen to him: he is the sower, the seed and the food for growth. Relax: the harvest will take care of itself.

# Sunday Homily

## SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

19 JULY 2020

YEAR A

“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man”

Matthew 13:37

### Illustration

You can walk into some school classrooms and find a model of attentiveness, application and industry, with an atmosphere of good humour and comradeship. The teacher is respected, the rules obeyed and the examination results confirm what a good school it is. But you can walk into another classroom in the same school and discover a bedlam of noise, disturbance and an undercurrent of violence which holds no promise of success for students or the school.

The difference is in the conditions under which the young people come to the school. Within each of these classrooms we would find sincere young people, keen to learn, and others who care not one jot for education, even among students whose background and advantages predispose them to self-confidence and the desire to learn. We would find others whose poverty and lack of stability can undermine their potential and self-respect, ill preparing them for the demands of school, against which they rebel.

If we were school inspectors, how should we deal with the troublemakers? Close the school? That would be unfair to the industrious children. Weed out the nuisances? But perhaps external circumstances beyond their control are to blame for their attitudes. Perhaps we should wait until they are at the end of their education to examine their overall results, to allow for greater inspiration and the effects of a healthy, optimistic environment on their growth and ability to change; and then permit their own actions to determine their futures.

### Gospel Teaching

There has been much discussion about this parable and to whom it applies. It would be easiest to believe that it is the world in general. It could refer to those people in Israel who would not accept Jesus as the Messiah. But others suggest that it actually refers to us, the members of Christ's own Church.

In his explanation of the parable, Jesus says that it is the Son of Man “who sows the good seed” and “the field is the world”. But those whom Jesus draws into membership of his Church gather in his name and it is amongst these, his chosen, that the weeds are sown by the evil one. There has always been evil in

the world at large and it was partly to overcome such evil that Jesus came in the first place. But as this Gospel was written when the Church was in its early stages of development it may be a warning. Just because the teaching of Jesus is the perfect model to be followed, some of its adherents are not perfect, just like the errant children in school.

It would be wonderful to think that the influence of Jesus would instantly transform his followers to mirror him in every way, but life is not like that and neither are people. Spiritual opportunity, like education, can transform its participants but also may be abused; a good influence can turn rotten and can poison the whole. Even in the best surroundings, some good people change, becoming like weeds in a field of good grain. Jesus warns us against assuming that all people in his field of activity are wholesome. It is his word, his influence, his life which must guide us, or we may end up collected together with the weeds and dealt with accordingly.

## Application

However, our next question might be, “Can a bad seed change its nature?” We need to watch out for and guard against the bad influences even where trustworthiness might be assumed. But what about those children whose disadvantaged start in life disturbs their behaviour? Or those church members who have been swayed by other influences? What about the possibility of change, for naughty children, for developing churches, and for us?

It is important to heed Jesus’ warning because our eternal life depends upon it. But it is crucial that we do not become paralysed by fear. Jesus never gave up on anyone; indeed, just before his own death he forgave a criminal and promised him a place in heaven – not sometime in the future or at “the end of the age”; but that very day. Leaving behind our evil ways is an opportunity we can take up every single day. Forgiveness by God is complete for those who repent.

So perhaps, then, the answer to our question is “no”: a seed cannot change its own character, but God can, by his gifts and the promises which he makes clear through Jesus, promises which he keeps.

# Sunday Homily

## SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

26 JULY 2020

YEAR A

“The kingdom of heaven is like...”

Matthew 13:31

### Illustration

Many gardens are looking their best now, with flowerbeds in full bloom offering a magnificent profusion of colour, and vegetable gardens producing scrumptious, mouth-watering crops.

There are so many gardens to enjoy: our own (if we are keen gardeners) or, perhaps, our neighbours' (if we're not!). Then there are those truly wonderful gardens, some associated with grand houses, which deservedly draw in countless hosts of admiring visitors.

As we wander round our gardens, enjoying the rich colours and beautiful shapes and scents of flowers, or anticipating the tastes of newly cropped fruit and vegetables, perhaps questions – unspoken and marvelling – come into mind, questions like: “Does it really all begin with a small seed? How does anyone know what to sow, where, and when to sow it? Where does one start?”

### Gospel Teaching

Today's Gospel tells of Jesus “sowing seeds” – being a gardener, if you like. In nearly all his parables he “sows seeds”, seeds of wisdom and encouragement, seeds of knowledge and confidence, which will grow in the hearts and minds of his listeners – among whom we, of course, number. They are seeds that if (when!) nurtured will flourish, and be fruitful.

Typically, he uses for his “seeds” everyday examples, things his listeners would recognise and know: the tiny seed which grows to become a strong bush; the single cell of yeast helping “flat” ingredients to become a wholesome loaf. He tells of folk who, in their everyday surroundings, spot real treasure (in the field and among the pearls), treasure which they value sufficiently to give up all else to gain. And to people with fisherman-neighbours, he spoke of a huge sea harvest, fish of every kind.

The “seeds” that Jesus is sowing here are seeds about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is a challenging concept for many of us, but Jesus' words affirm how a smidgen of faith, a seed of love – our kingdom faith – if nurtured, will grow

into something big and good. He shows that this kingdom faith is of great worth – “beyond price”, one might say – something greatly to be desired, beyond our known measures of wealth. And the kingdom is all-embracing: there’s a place – and room – for us all.

## Application

In recognising Jesus sowing “seeds” here it is important to note that, whilst he may well be looking ahead to the end product – the magnificently colourful flowerbed in full bloom, or the vegetable garden heaving with prize winning crops – he is in fact, in the parables of our Gospel today, focusing on the starting point: the tiny seed which grows to become a vibrant plant, the minuscule yeast cell which acts to produce a wholesome crunchy loaf.

Sometimes gardeners will start with a seed, and watch it become a lovely flourishing plant. Sometimes they will take a well-developed strong root clump, and divide it, each small part itself growing into a thriving plant.

Who first sowed a seed of faith in us? Did our faith come through what our family and friends shared with us and rooted in us? However we received it, and however small and frail it may sometimes seem, it has brought us into the kingdom.

If we take nothing else from today’s Gospel reading we must recognise that the small seed of faith in us, that small cell of faith working in us and helping us to grow, the single jewel, the small but rich treasure, is our kingdom faith. As kingdom faith, its potential to grow and grow is unlimited. And grow it will, as we grow and grow in Jesus Christ, and so enhance the kingdom.

The small seed of faith growing and working in us does indeed make us part of the kingdom – a great multiracial, multicultural, multi-generational harvest of all sizes and scents, of all colours and shapes.

The most basic of meals or the grandest of banquets is enriched by the inclusion of vegetables great or small. Our gardens and wayside hedgerows, flower arrangements at home (or in church), are all enriched by small flowers as well as large blooms, the hidden beauties as well as the bright colours.

So, too, is God’s kingdom. You – we – are all part of the kingdom, God’s kingdom.

Let’s nurture this kingdom faith in us. Above all, let us sow and share the kingdom seeds with all around us, and so help God’s kingdom flourish and grow. Let’s do it – today.