

Homily for July 10, 2011 (15th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65 (vv.); Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

Putting in a Good Word

One of the consequences of being in a position of leadership in the Church is that some folks think you have more power than you actually do! Practically speaking, when you want to get things done, that perception can be a benefit. However, it can also be a burden, especially when it accompanies expectations that you may or may not be able to meet.

Several months ago I was approached by someone at a meeting we were attending. He was looking for work and was interested in a job at one of our ministries. I gave him some general information but cautioned him that I didn't know what was available and didn't make the hiring decisions. He nodded as if he understood and then asked, "But would you put in a good word for me anyway?"

All of us appreciate the value of "a good word." It's nice when others "put in a good word" for us to get a job or perhaps a deal on something we want to buy. It's nice, too, when we have the opportunity to "put in a good word" for others. One of the joys of my ministry has been writing letters of recommendation for scholarships, college admissions, and job applications for some of the young men and women I've been privileged to work with over the years.

Today's scripture readings remind us of the good news that God is always ready to "put in a good word" for us, and quite literally! God not only puts in that good word for us, he wants to put that good word—God's word—into us.

In our first reading from what scripture scholars sometimes call Trito (Third) Isaiah—the "Book of Consolation" likely written to spiritually strengthen the people of Israel as their time of exile in Babylon was ending and they began to return to Jerusalem—the author uses an image from nature to convey the abiding power and efficacy of God's word. It reveals that God's word, like the rain and snow falling from the sky, has a purpose.

Further, it's part of a natural and continuing cycle: just as rain and snow fall to the earth, evaporate; and soak into the ground to nourish plants which give off oxygen (a chemical component of water), so God's word is also part of a regular process of revelation and proclamation, reception, response, further revelation and proclamation. Just as the rain and snow have the purpose of nourishing us and the

earth, so God's word also has a purpose: to do his will. When that word becomes part of us we, too, do God's will.

Jesus makes this even more explicit in the Parable of the Sower. A popular credit card ad on TV asks us, "What's in your wallet?" In this parable Jesus might be asking us, "What's in your field?" i.e. field of our hearts. What's the condition of our soil: paved over, rocky, weed-choked, or rich and ready to receive the seed of his word?

For most of us, the answer is likely to be, "Well, Lord, that depends what part of the field you're standing in and the day you're standing in it!" Even the saints had rough patches of soil to deal with. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine famously prayed, "Lord, make me chaste...but not yet!" One of our life-long tasks as Christians is to work the soil of our hearts to make them more receptive to his word. We're works in progress. St. Paul alludes to this in our second reading when he remarks that "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves, as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."

For me, the paved-over paths (where the word of God is snatched away) are those distractions that I bring into prayer. I read the words with my eyes and lips, but my mind and heart are elsewhere. The rocky ground is those places where my bad habits are only temporarily interrupted by resolutions and half-hearted attempts to change them. I embrace the call to conversion fully...until it gets too hard; then I go back to what I know. My faith in God's grace grows weak.

The thorny patches for me these days are primarily the worries of my office and ministry as provincial minister: personnel limitations and other challenges, financial constraints, the aging and illnesses of our friars, etc. I sometimes let work get in the way of prayer with the rationalization that, "My work is my prayer." But that can only be true when I'm in a prayerful state of mind; and when I'm overworking I'm definitely not in a prayerful state of mind!

I hope that good patch of soil is getting larger over time. It's that place in my heart that's open, receptive, nourished, and watered by God's word.

When I see God's word bearing fruit in what I say, how I treat others, in good decisions and courageous actions...then I know that I am being prepared for something even better and a realization of the promise proclaimed in our Responsorial Psalm: "The seed that falls on good ground will yield a bountiful harvest." +