

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65 (64); Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

A sower went out to sow ... Let anyone with ears listen!

Matt 13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"



Matt 13:10 Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" 11 He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13 The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they under-

stand.' 14 With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. 15 For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.'

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

Matt 13:18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is part of the third largest discourse of Matthew's five. At the end, you find the concluding formula: *When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.* (Matthew 13:53)

Thought for the day

The parable of the sower is told twice, in an original form and in a later, church interpretation. The explanation tends to dominate our reading; but it might be worthwhile allowing the original parable to "speak." It tells of small, even careless, beginnings—the sower scatters all over the place. As we see in nature, tiny seeds have an astonishing, miraculous effect. Go back over your own experience and recall something which began modestly but which in the end grew surprisingly. The reign of God is like that—the modest beginnings of Jesus' own preaching had tremendous effect.

Prayer

God of every harvest, it can be hard today to be confident about the Good News and yet we know that it is you who give the growth (1 Cor 3:7).

i) You have three very distinct portions of text here, each from a different "layer" of the tradition, reflecting different concerns. The parable of the sower is found also in Mark 4:1-9 (slightly longer) and Luke 8:4-8 (quite short). The surprising increase is given differently in Matthew (100-60-30) and Mark (30-60-100).

(ii) The intervening—and very puzzling—conversation is also found in Mark 4:10-12 and Luke 8:9-10. Matthew's version is much longer. On the face of it, the text seems absurd: why speak at all if the purpose is so that people may *not* understand? The citation from Isaiah is used elsewhere in similar contexts: John 12:40 and Acts 28:26-27. A very similar text (Is 29:10) is cited in Romans 11:8. The context for this unusual spread is the much later Christian attempt to understand rejection of the Gospel by God's first chosen people. They reasoned that as it happened in this way, it must have been part of God's plan to extend salvation beyond the boundaries of Judaism. They found support for this in the texts from Isaiah. Matthew—always the rabbi—gives the fullest version of the text and even adds

the beatitude in vv. 16-17 (Luke has the same beatitude but locates it elsewhere at 10:23-24). Here it fits the context and indeed Matthew's purpose. This means, to put it plainly, that we do not have here Jesus' own understanding of the purpose of the parables but a later generation's understanding of God's mysterious use of the "no" from the people of Israel in order to create a "yes" among the Gentiles. Hence the beatitude at the end!

(iii) The allegorical explanation of the parable—usually assumed to reflect both a later "church" context and a flattening of the original parable—is also found in all three synoptic gospels, Mark 4:13-20 and Luke 8:11-15. Matthew's version reflects his interests and typical vocabulary. He takes up the word "hear" to introduce the explanation. He moves the idea of understanding from "outside" the parable and makes it part of the interpretation. In Mark, the seed is the "word"; in Luke, the "word of God"; in Matthew, the "word of the kingdom." Very importantly, Matthew expresses his interpretation in the singular, challenging the individual hearer to respond.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." (Is 6:9-10)

It is part of the call of Isaiah, whose preaching will be met with in-comprehension. In the context, this is not God's will, but is foreseen and incorporated into the call of the prophet. There a positive reversal of this in chapters 32. *Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed, and the ears of those who have hearing will listen.* (Is 32:3)

KIND OF WRITING

(i) The original parable is a metaphor, a comparison of some kind designed to trigger a new understanding or a change in the heart of the hearer. (Parables have their own meaning independent of any later allegorical reading.) In our case, the parable portrays the astonishing growth of the kingdom in spite of its smallness during the ministry of Jesus. Most likely, the climactic sequence 30-60-100 belongs to the layer of the ministry of Jesus.

(ii) The intervening conversation is a *chreia*, this time in the form of a question and answer, using a biblical citation. It concludes with a *beatitudo*, backed by a comparison with other generations.

(iii) Allegorical interpretation is known the Bible (see the parable of the trees in Judges 9:1-21) and became very common later on in Christian interpretation. In our context here, the allegorical interpretation reflects a situation later than the ministry of Jesus (the persecution of disciples and the "settling down" of believers) and turns the parable of surprising growth into a warning about what can go wrong when complacency sets in.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

As we saw above, the use of Is 6:9-10 is spread across the NT. The same puzzling rejection of Jesus is being addressed in each case.

ST PAUL

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor 3:5-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The Palestinian context would lend tremendous force to these images. The crowds are addressed. The image of the sower was not confined to the world of the Bible. Seneca writes in one of his letters, "Words should be scattered like seed; no matter how small the seed may be, if it once has found favourable ground, it unfolds its strength and from an insignificant thing spreads to its greatest growth" (Letter 38.2).

Verse 8 In spite of everything, the kingdom will flourish to an amazing degree.

Verse 9 Given that we all have ears, this means every one! This forces each listener to ask, "Will I be part of the eschatological harvest?"

Verse 10 "To them" is quite revealing—already a them/us setting is presumed.

Verse 12 An offensive text, on the sur-

face. In the immediate context, it means that those already open can receive the word, but those whose hearts are closed cannot.

Verse 13 The Greek is difficult. The text in Mark could be purpose (in order that) or consequential (with the result that). In any case, Matthew changes Mark's "in order that" (*hina*) to "on account of" (*hoti*).

Verse 16 This is aimed directly at the Matthean community.

Verse 18 Matthew takes up the language of hearing, thereby echoing the ending of the original parable.

Verse 19 The issue here is *not* understanding.

Verse 23 Why this reverse order? A hundredfold yield is possible but extraordinary. Perhaps Matthew wants the more ordinary experience to be the climax?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus uses parable to make people think about their own responses to his message. As you read this parable you may recognise that at different times you have been like each of the different types of soil. As you recall times when you presented fertile soil for the word of God, what helped you create that receptive atmosphere? What lessons for life do you get from that?

2. Parents with children, teachers with pupils, speakers with listeners, are all like sowers in a field where the preparation of the soil is up to another—the child, pupil or listener. They can sow the seed but cannot guarantee that it will bear fruit. At times there may be a temptation not to try any more. The challenge is to sow in hope. When have you been surprised by the harvest you have reaped?

3. "We are wasting our time here" may sometimes be the apparent wisdom in a group. Have there been times when you have gone against this apparent wisdom and seen your efforts bear fruit?

PRAYER

God of the heavens, God of the earth, all creation awaits your gift of new life. Prepare our hearts to receive the word of your Son, that his gospel may grow within us and yield a harvest that is a hundredfold. Through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

For the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the children of God

Rom 8:18 For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. 19 For the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly but because of God who subjected it—in hope 21 that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers together until now. 23 Not only this, but we ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 *For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees?* 25 *But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with endurance.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

These few lines of Paul manage to be both attractive and impenetrable, perhaps in equal measure. What is Paul actually saying and why? It helps to remember that Paul is an apocalyptic Jew. His thinking and language are influenced by this wide spiritual current. The apocalyptic movement—often exotic in expression and culturally remote—responded to a fundamental question facing all believers: how can we hold together the goodness of God and the fact of suffering, often immense and, evidently, unjust?

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context “in the listening community” must be read in light of the letter. Where are the readers at this point? Paul began with a tremendous sense of failure in creation, evidenced in sin and profound opposition to God. This is outlined chiefly in chapters 1-5. In chapter 8, and in particular, in these verses, Paul proclaims God’s ultimate victory over the tragedy of the human condition.

KIND OF WRITING

Chapter 8 unfolds in three large arguments:

- 8:1-17 The Spirit and *life*
- 8:18-30 The Spirit and *hope*
- 8:31-39 God’s irrevocable *love* in Jesus

Within the subsection 8:18-30, there are key moments:

- 8:18-25 *Future transformation*
- 8:26-27 The role of the Spirit
- 8:28-30 God’s plan of salvation

Once more, the reading could be expanded to include vv. 24-25.

RELATED PASSAGES

For our momentary, light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (2 Cor 4:17-18)

It is the same with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So also it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living person”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. Like the one made of dust, so too are those made of dust, and like the one from heaven, so too those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:42-49)

My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die. (Phil 1:20)

But to Adam he said, “Because you obeyed your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ cursed is the ground thanks to you; in painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, but you will eat the grain of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat food until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return.” (Gen 3:17-19)

Much more then, because we have now

been declared righteous by his blood, we will be saved through him from God’s wrath. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, since we have been reconciled, will we be saved by his life? Not only this, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation. (Rom 5:9-11)

Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom 5:3-5)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18 With the strong expression “I consider,” Paul sets out the *thesis* of vv. 18-30, contrasting the current critical situation with future transformation. Two initial steps confirm the thesis: (i) vv. 19-22—the longing of creation and (ii) vv. 23-25—the longing of believers. The “present sufferings” are the various afflictions suffered on account of faith in Christ. Cf. 2 Cor 1:5, 6, 7; Gal 5:24; Phil 3:10; Col 1:24. “Present” in the NET translation conceals the word *kairos*, that is, the time of salvation. The present (intermediate) age was inaugurated by Jesus’ own resurrection. Thus, the future glory points to the resurrection of the dead. See 1 Cor 15:42-49 and 2 Cor 4:17-18 above. The word “revealed” (*apokalytō*) reminds us that we are in an apocalyptic worldview, where by the beginning of time and the end of time resemble each other. Such “congruency” is evidence of the overall plan of God. Cf. *Now before faith came we were held in custody under the law, being kept as prisoners until the coming faith would be revealed.* (Gal 3:23) Glory has a somewhat different range of meanings in Hebrew thought, pointing less to appearance and more to substance. Cf. *Then the glory of the Lord shall appear, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God, because the Lord has spoken.* (LXX Isa 40:5) *And they cried out one to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth; the whole earth is full of his glory.* (Isa 6:3)

Verse 19 Paul personifies creation in a way that Genesis avoids for fear of idolatry. By creation, he means not simply the inhabitants of the world but the created order and everything non-human in it. At the end, the true identity of the faithful will be clearly unveiled. The tone of

confidence is notable. Cf. *My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die.* (Phil 1:20)

Verse 20 The reference here is to Adam and the distortion of creation resulting from his transgression. It was not creation which caused this situation but humanity itself. At the same time, the consequences were decreed by God—as usual the passive indicates God as the real agent. See not only Gen 3:17-19 but also Romans 1:18-25 and 5:12-19 for the full force of the reference. The cumbersome expression “not willingly” separates Paul’s view from a gnostic one in which matter as such is at fault.

This is the only use of the noun futility/purposelessness in Paul. But the verb occurs earlier: *For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened.* (Rom 1:21) There may be an echo of a famous biblical use of the same word: *“Futile! Futile!” laments the Teacher, “Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!”* (Eccl 1:2) This futility is registered in immorality, noted by Paul earlier, and therefore to be found also in the experience of the Roman Christ-believers. Even so, there was also always hope as we can see even in Gen 3:15. The bland propaganda of the empire is challenged Paul’s teaching about the present and the future. Everything is not perfect *now*. Cf. 1 Thess 5:3 (below under verse 22).

Verse 21 Decay is the very word used in 1 Corinthians 15. The final resurrection of humanity will trigger the restoration of creation, as it was intended to be from the very start (cf. Ps 8). Cf. *For heaven will be new, and the earth will be new, and they shall not remember the former things, nor shall they come upon their heart.* (LXX Isa 65:17)

This is the only use of the noun freedom in Romans but the verb is used in key places. Cf. Rom 6:18, 22; 8:2, 21; Gal 5:1. In Paul’s view, God does not intervene directly in creation but always through humans and specifically by means of their conversion. Thus human responsibility for ecological disorder is also in view here.

Verse 22 The personification of creation continues. Firstly, Paul underlines the universality of the human condition, by extending it to creation as such. Compare again Rom 5:12-19, where Adam—the progenitor of the race—is

used to underline the universal need of God’s extraordinary grace in Christ. Secondly, the groaning and suffering are really birth pangs or labour pains, suggesting that something wonderful is going to be born of it all. Cf. *Now when they are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction comes on them, like labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will surely not escape.* (1 Thess 5:3) Cf. Isa 13:8; 21:3; 26:17-18; Jer 4:31; 22:23; Hos 13:13. The transition to the groaning of believers, in the next subsection, is smooth.

Verse 23 Humans are not at all excluded from these cosmic travails: *So, I find the law that when I want to do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being. But I see a different law in my members waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Rom 7:21-24).

First-fruits—a favourite metaphor of Paul (Rom. 11:16; 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20, 23; 16:15; 2 Thess. 2:13). This is the only time the image is used in relation to the Spirit. In the sense of guarantee, it is related to the image of a down payment or first instalment. *But it is God who establishes us together with you in Christ and who anointed us, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a down payment.* (2 Cor 1:21-22) *Now the one who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave us the Spirit as a down payment. Therefore we are always full of courage, and we know that as long as we are alive here on earth we are absent from the Lord—for we live by faith, not by sight.* (2 Cor 5:5-7) Adoption is literally appointment or acceptance as son or daughter. Perhaps Paul also has in mind the prevalent practice of the Roman emperors who often “adopted” their successors. Here the adoption seems to be in the future, whereas earlier it seems to have already taken place: *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery leading again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, “Abba, Father.”* (Rom 8:15) As often in Paul, it is both already and not yet. Accordingly, as evidence for this future hope, Paul points to the experience of the Spirit and the spiritual gifts as a guarantee, a first instalment, of future hope, grounded in the present moment. NB not redemption *from* the body but *of* the body. Paul is no Platonist.

Verse 24 The opening phrase might surprise, given the future orientation of hope thus far. But Paul combines present reality and future conviction as in v. 23. The teaching on hope takes us firmly

back to Rom 5:1-5, the introduction to Romans 5-8, and as well to Rom 5:9-11. Not being able to see what we hope for reminds us of Abraham and the earlier discussion Romans 4: *Against hope Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became the father of many nations according to the pronouncement, “so will your descendants be.”* (Rom 4:18)

Verse 25 Two words are important here. *Waiting eagerly* has already been mentioned in vv. 18 and 23. *Endurance* is the apocalyptic virtue, encompassing patience, perseverance, hope and expectation. Cf. *Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope.* (Rom 5:3-4) *For even Christ did not please himself, but just as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope. Now may the God of endurance and comfort give you unity with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* (Rom 15:3-6) See 2 Cor 4:17-18 above. This is a very active “endurance” in Paul’s view. *Eternal life to those who by perseverance in good works seek glory and honour and immortality.* (Rom 2:7) The very next verse 26 fills in what ought to (!) be happening.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It might help to name my own experience of sufferings of the present time. What’s going on in my life and in my world around me?
2. What are my own grounds for hope at this time? Again, it might be good to name these. Who are the people of hope? What are the signs of hope and goodness?
3. My own sense of being part of creation may help here. When have I experienced that (cosmic?) creatureliness?

BLESSING

As you go from here into the week ahead, with whatever joys and challenges it holds, do not be discouraged or disheartened. Remember the glory that awaits you as a child of God. Hold on to that truth; live in that hope.

And may the peace of God, the blessing of Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit be with you and among you. Amen.

My word shall shall accomplish that which I purpose

Isa 55:9 *For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

10 For 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 eater,

11 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.

12 *For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

13 *Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

A marvellous bit of poetry of Isaiah makes a perfect link with the Gospel. Here we have one of the best remembered and best loved passages from Second Isaiah.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The great poet of Is 40-55 draws his message of hope to a conclusion with an *affirmation* in chapter 54 (Mt Zion, true city of the LORD) and an *invitation* in chapter 55 (Come to the life-giving presence of the LORD). Chapter 55 also serves as a transition to chapter 56:1-8.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole of Isaiah 55 is very high quality poetry. Our passage comes from an oracle of YHWH, vv. 9-13.

- 9-11: YHWH speaks
- 12: A voice (the heavens?) comments
- 13: A voice (the earth?) comments

It would be good to read all of the chapter, as it is both short and powerful.

RELATED READINGS

On the power of God's word:
May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth. (Deuteronomy 32:2; cf. Is 40:8; cf. Is 45:23; Jer 29:11)

On God's power to reverse things:
I will open rivers on the bare heights,

and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. (Isaiah 41:18; cf. Is 51:3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 9 This is true always, of course, but it had particular force at the time of writing. Completely unexpectedly God was able to use Persian rulers to bring about his plans vis-à-vis the Israelites. Cf. *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.* (Isaiah 40:22-23)

Verse 10 To anyone close to the land, the image is powerful—but perhaps even more powerful for those living in the parched Middle East, as each year the desert blooms. The direct dependence on this natural miracle for food and survival is something to remember. Second Isaiah reflects here the latest science of the day, according to which the sky is no longer a firmament, a solid “bowl”, but a tent stretched across the sky. Any magical trigger of the water cycle is rejected here because it is all—both rain and snow—God’s creation.

Verse 11 The power of this word is a comfort for all who accept it and at the same time a challenge for anyone who resists it. The great Gerhard von Rad wrote of vv. 10-11: “This is surely prophecy’s most comprehensive state-

ment about the word of Yahweh and its effects.” Of God’s word we may say it is a creative word (51:16); it is a prophetic word (44:26; cf. 46:10-11; 48:15). The word creates justice (45:13). It is “teaching” (50:4; cf. 42:16). It is public, not secret (45:19; 48:16). That God speaks—reveals himself—is his special characteristic (52:6). In our text, the word is something of a “hypostasis” to use later theological jargon, lending a basis to the later link between personified wisdom and the word of God.

Verse 12 We have here a kind of hymn of joy in reaction. Cf. *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.* (Psalms 126:5-6) We are meant to think of a procession, perhaps in a drama, leading to applause.

Verse 13 The trees continue the illustration but the main point that the return will stand as an everlasting memorial...to God’s grace and not to human initiative. There is some delicious word play here. The word for “come up” is *ya^{al}eh*, based on the root *‘lh*, meaning to ascend or to go up, a term we for going up to Jerusalem in pilgrimage.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Delight in nature may be the best way to enter into this passage. The natural miracle of water and earth, life and growth may lead to a deep sense of being held by God.
2. The passage is faith / religion in champagne mode, so to speak—a mode we do not easily access these days... Lets not confuse the *mirabilia Dei* with the more pedestrian reality of church!
3. When have I found a word of God to be particularly effective in my life? It may have been in the course of discernment or perhaps in gratitude or in prayer? Recall that word and give thanks to God.

PRAYER

Merciful God, anoint me with you Holy Spirit. As I read your Word, let me hear your voice speaking to me from within. Give me the wisdom to understand your message to me. Let your Word be the joy of my heart and the light to my feet. Give me strength to build my life on your Word. Let it be done to me according to your Word. May I rejoice in the blessedness of hearing your Word and keeping it. *Speak Lord; your servant is listening.*

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65 (64); Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

READINGS 1 AND 3

The link is very clear: for Matthew the seed is “the word of the Kingdom”, that is the word of the Lord, a word will have, of its own accord, its effect in stupendous growth.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The latter part of Ps 65 (64) makes an excellent link between the first reading and the Gospel: *And thus you provide for the earth; you drench its furrows; you level it, soften it with showers; you bless its growth.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 55:10-11

What is your experience of God’s word? For the prophet Isaiah, the word of God is truly effective, as effective as rain falling on the earth.

Second reading

Romans 8:18-23

What do we make of our difficult experiences and the suffering we go through? St Paul believes that these are signs that something wonderful is coming to birth in us and even in creation as a whole, under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Gospel

Matthew 13:1-23

Everyone remembers the parable of the sower. It might help to know that in our reading we hear two versions. First of all we hear the parable, with its own original message. Then, we are offered a later church interpretation. Both are good but they are different.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 17 July

Exodus 1:8-14, 22

For the next three weeks almost, the lectionary offers readings from Exodus, including such passages as the Ten Commandments. We start today with the story of the oppression Israelites in Egypt—a common human story of aggression towards the immigrant—not unknown in our Irish experience!

Matthew 10:34-11:1

This passage can surprise and even offend. The sword, however, is not the sword of judgment but the sword of decision, as the following verses show.

Tuesday 18 July

Exodus 2:1-15

The story of Moses’ birth is told with delicious irony—the daughter of the Pharaoh appoints the child’s own mother as wet nurse. Moving quickly on, the adult Moses commits a crime and has to run away.

Matthew 11:20-24

Again, a difficult passage. It portrays Jesus the prophet, encountering rejection. Yet, like the prophets of old he continues to announce his offer, even if in blistering terms.

Wednesday 19 July

Exodus 3:1-6, 9-12

Genuine encounters with the divine can never be “told” in ordinary words and so it is that Moses’ encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* must be given in symbol. Fire—both material and somehow immaterial or spiritual—is both attractive and awesome, inviting and dangerous. Tomorrow we hear the second part of the burning bush.

Matthew 11:25-27

Jesus exclaims a powerful prayer to God. To understand it well, we need to remember that the learned and the clever are *powerful* while children are *powerless*. Thus Jesus’ message is for the oppressed.

Thursday 20 July

St Apollinaris, bishop and martyr

Exodus 3:13-20

We are about to hear an extra-ordinary passage, a passage of signal importance of the Jewish people and of great import for the Christian tradition. The name of God—I AM WHO I AM or YHWH—comes from the verb to be. In Jewish tradition, this holy name is never spoken out loud. In Christian tradition, we speak of God as “holy Being who lets be” (John Macquarrie). It is all, of course, deeply mysterious, yet liberating and even practical.

Matthew 11:28-30

In Jewish tradition, the Torah or the Law was regarded as a (very) welcome yoke, that is, guidance which you help the faithful plough a straight furrow in life. Jesus’ yoke or burden is, in addition, easy and light.

Friday 21 July

St Laurence of Brindisi, doctor

Exodus 11:10-12:14

Our reading from Exodus has moved quickly on and today we hear the instructions for the Passover. This memorial celebration kept alive in all subsequent generations not just the memory of the Exodus but the actual experience of it.

Matthew 12:1-8

At a surface level, this passage contrasts in a familiar way legalism and sensible flexibility. At a deeper level, it takes to the identity of Jesus himself, “something greater than the Temple.”

Saturday 22 July

St Mary Magdalen

Although the devotional and liturgical traditions conflate Mary Magdalen, the sister of Lazarus and the woman who was a sinner, these are three separate individuals and are not to be confused. Mary of Magdala is key witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Song of Songs 3:1-4

The Song of Songs unfolds as a series of love poems, serious and playful. These include what we may call quest stories or reflections on seeking the beloved. Our reading, beautiful in itself, makes for a great introduction to today’s Gospel.

John 20:1-2, 11-18

The Fourth Gospel has many “quest” stories, none more powerful than the quest of Mary Magdalen for the risen Lord. The words used mark a significant shift in this Gospel. The opening question of Jesus in this Gospel—“What are you looking for?” (John 1:38)—becomes “Whom are you looking for?” (John 20:15) We proclaim a *person* and not simply a doctrine.