

# HEARERS OF THE WORD

Sirach 39:6-10; Psalm 116 (115); 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Matthew 13:24-43

## The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field

Matt 13:24 Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' 28 He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Matt 13:31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Matt 13:33 *He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."*

Matt 13:34 *Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."*

Matt 13:36 *Then he left the crowds and went*

*into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!*

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) The parable of the weeds (darnel, tares) and the wheat and its allegorical explanation (included here) are unique to Matthew. The suspicion that we are dealing with Matthean material and even Matthean composition is supported by sampling the vocabulary and noticing how much of it is typical Matthew (compare **8-1-3-0**; weeds **8-0-0-0**; bear fruit **23-0-14-2**; householder **7-1-4-0**; to gather **7-0-1-0**).



### Thought for the day

What do we do with the inheritance of St Patrick today? From the surviving evidence, we see a man totally open to God's call, grounded firmly in the Word of God and prayer, full of generosity and hard work. Legends about him abound, of course, but the spread of such accounts tells its own story about the impact he made. We too are called to the very same mission, rooted in Scripture and prayer, lived in great generosity of spirit.

### Prayer

Renew in our hearts and lives the spirit of St Patrick, whose feast we keep.

(ii) The parable of the mustard seed is found in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19. Matthew omits the opening question in Mark and Luke, possibly because he has used the word *compare* at the very start.

(iii) The parable of the leaven is found in Luke 13:20-21. Matthew's version is slightly shorter, again omitting the opening rhetorical question.

(iv) The passage on the use of the parables is found in Mark 4:33-34. In Mark, it functions as a pedagogical observation. In Matthew, it is theological, complete with a citation from Psalm 78:2.

(v) It is likely that the opening parable and its interpretation are meant to deal with issues which arose after the resurrection and perhaps even after the first missionary thrusts of Christianity. Together they address a "church" question: what do we do with people who are "in" but not "of"? How do we deal with people who are half-hearted or lukewarm in the community? The broad response is tolerant: leave them alone and at the time of harvest all will be revealed! At the same time, the parable and its allegorical reading function as frames around another series of mini-parables, taken from the common tradition or from the sources used by Matthew and Luke. Both of the mini-parables "comment" on the parable of the weeds. The

mustard seed represents astonishing growth, i.e. there is always hope, things can change. The broad “hospitality” of the mustard tree might itself be a little allegory for the Matthean community to be more welcoming! Secondly, leaven has a kind of inevitability—the bread will rise almost no matter what. The leaven will cause “rising” of its own accord. Matthew thus relativizes the intolerance of insiders.

#### KIND OF WRITING

There are three kinds of writing here. (i) Straight parables intended to provoke and give rise to changes in attitudes—the mustard seeds and yeast parables. (ii) A short *chreia* in the form of a question, which is answered by a citation. (iii) Allegories—the weeds and the wheat parable is at least incipiently allegorical—the suspicion is confirmed by the decoding at the end. The allegory sets up seven points of comparison:

- 1 The sower = the Son of Man (Jesus).
- 2 The field = the world.
- 3 The good seed = the children of the kingdom.
- 4 The weeds = the children of the evil one.
- 5 The enemy = the devil.
- 6 The harvest = the end of the age (or this world).
- 7 The reapers = angels.

#### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Harvest is used in the OT as an image of judgment, a very natural image of sifting, as found in Psalm 1:4-6. Cf. “It is perhaps on account of us that the time of threshing is delayed for the righteous—on account of the sins of those who inhabit the earth.” (2 Esd 4:39)

#### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Harvest as a judgment metaphor is found in Matthew 3:12; 13:20, 39. Likewise Rev 14:14-20.

#### ST PAUL

Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6-8)

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge

and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Phil 1:9-11)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 24** The parable, unlike Jesus’ own parables, is not particularly disturbing—it doesn’t challenge common sense etc. It does, in the form of the allegory, teach moral attitudes and practical approaches. There is, perhaps, a discreet critique of the community members who are quick to evaluate others. It is not really your business! Cf. Romans 14:1-4, which puts its very succinctly indeed.

**Verses 25-26** There are *two* sowings, in this parable. The Greek term *zizania* refers to an especially undesirable weed that *resembles* wheat but has poisonous seeds.

**Verses 27-28** You can feel their consternation—a very real thing for us today in the church—and the desire to clean things up.

**Verses 29-30** The reply is plain: no, and in any case, it is none your business! The Lord of the harvest will see to it at the right time.

**Verses 31-32** The parable of the mustard seed is offered without comment, almost like a zen koan. It does bring together, however, the issues of the preceding parable, i.e. expansion and hospitality. Even though the expansion of the church can bring with it a lowering of commitment, nevertheless, hospitality is the mark of the kingdom.

**Verse 33** Even this parable takes up issues raised in the first one: yeast takes time and we have to allow the time for the transformation to take place. And yet, yeast has its own power and inevitability. Likewise the kingdom—do not give up too soon on others, or even on yourself! The quantities are extraordinary: a measure was c. 7 kilos, the total should be 21 kilos — bread for about 100 persons.

**Verses 34-35** This rather hopeful read of the function of the parables is in tension with a similar passage between the parable of the sower and its allegorical interpretation. At least here, Jesus speaks in order that they will understand! Frequently in Matthew, you have a fulfilment citation—actually not from “the prophet” but from Psalm 78.

**Verses 36-40** A more allegorical reading of the parable is offered, which spells out the original message by “decoding” it.

**Verses 41-42** These verses combine original Jesus material (v. 41) with Matthean commentary (v. 42). The language of Jesus is very apocalyptic and fits with his preaching as an end-time figure. Gnashing of teeth as an expression of punishment is almost unique to Matthew (8-0-1-0).

**Verse 43** Nevertheless, it all closes on a brilliantly positive note, not unlike the last parable of the Great Assize in Matthew 25. *Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.* (Daniel 12:3) Cf. *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.* (Matthew 17:2)

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The owner of the field who allowed the wheat and the darnel to grow together is a reminder to us to be patient with ourselves and with others when we see everything is not right. Sometimes a preoccupation with the negative (the darnel) can blind us to seeing the positive in our own lives and in the lives of others. When have you found that a willingness to live with the messiness of the present created the conditions for future growth?
2. Have you ever found that it was through accepting the darnel that you learned important lessons for life, e.g., learning by making mistakes, or asking stupid questions, or taking foolish risks?
3. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are reminders that seemingly insignificant things can have very positive results. Have you ever been surprised by the benefit to yourself or others of a kind gesture, a small initiative, or a word of encouragement?

#### PRAYER

O God, who chose the Bishop Saint Patrick to preach your glory to the peoples of Ireland, grant, through his merits and intercession, that those who glory in the name of Christian may never cease to proclaim your wondrous deeds to all.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

# Nations will speak of their wisdom, and the congregation will proclaim their praise

Sirach 39:6 If the great Lord is willing,  
they will be filled with the spirit of understanding;  
they will pour forth words of wisdom of their own  
and give thanks to the Lord in prayer.  
7 The Lord will direct their counsel and knowledge  
as they meditate on his mysteries.  
8 They will show the discipline of their training  
and will glory in the law of the Lord's covenant.  
9 Many will praise their understanding;  
it will never be blotted out.  
Their memory will not disappear,  
and their names will live through all generations.  
10 Nations will speak of their wisdom,  
and the congregation will proclaim their praise.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is concerned penetrating the mysteries of God and finding the right words to express them. The writer is sharply aware that such understanding is very much a gift — the fruit of discipline and application, to be sure — but primarily a gift.

## KIND OF WRITING

As often in the Wisdom books, this is poetry, following the usual pattern of two lines saying almost the same thing. The repetition is very enriching as may be seen from a careful reading.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Ecclesiasticus or Sirach is to be distinguished from Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth. Both belong to the biblical Wisdom books, but they are quite different. Sirach is part of the wider, Deutero-canonical canon. As such, it survived mostly in Greek (and Latin), until recently. About two-thirds of the Hebrew original have been recovered.

Sirach shows many typical Wisdom features: practical advice and proverbs, misogyny, a great appreciation for nature. Added to that, there is a considerable concern with the temple cult. Such attention to worship is evident in our reading.

*Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom. (Sir 50:27)*

It seems to have been collated and trans-

lated by a scribe named Ben Sira in the early second century BC.

Our reading bridges two sections: 35:1-13 on sacrifices and 35:14-35. The juxtaposition reveals their connectedness, a common theme in the books of the prophets.

Our reading is part of a longer poem (38:24-39:11) on the search for Wisdom. Part 7 of the whole book (28:24-43:33) is concerned

with “demonstrating the results of wisdom.” Just as society needs skilled workers, likewise it needs wise seekers after wisdom.

## RELATED PASSAGES

The structure of Sirach is given by eight poems on the finding of wisdom: 1:1-10; 4:11-19; 6:18-37; 14:20-15:10; 24:1-34; 32:14-33:18; 38:24-39:11; 44:1-15. These poems are interesting in themselves and give the reader direct evidence of the writer's intention and core teaching. The verses immediately preceding our reading are helpful:

They seek out the wisdom of all the ancients and are concerned with prophecies; they preserve the sayings of the famous and penetrate the subtleties of parables; they seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs and are at home with the obscurities of parables. They serve among the great and appear before rulers; they travel in foreign nations and learn what is good and evil in the human lot. They set their hearts to rise early to seek the Lord who made them and to petition the Most High; they open their mouths in prayer and ask pardon for their sins. (Sirach 39:1-5)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 6** The opening conditional sentence (“if”) governs the results which following in 6bcd. The gift of understanding is expressed in wisely-chosen words and in thanksgiving.

**Verse 7** Again, God's guidance and gift are underlined. The word translated as

“mysteries” here is literally thing hidden (*apokryphoi*).

**Verse 8** Again, the word translated as “discipline” is actually *paideia*, a word of immense cultural resonance at the time, meaning far more than discipline. The whole of Greek culture and education was regarded as the sphere and summit of *paideia*. A dictionary definition offers this: *the act of providing guidance for responsible living, upbringing, training, instruction*. The affirmation of Hellenistic cultural values is matched by a commitment to Torah and covenant.

**Verse 9** A four-fold affirmation of immortal fame (Sirach did not teach life after death), using the typical parallelism of biblical poetry.

**Verse 10** Two groups are in view: the wider community of all humanity and the narrower group of the believers. The congregation is literally *ekklesia*, a successful Greek version of the Hebrew *qahal*, the assembly of God's people.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** We all stand before the mystery of the cosmos and, through creation, before the mystery of the creator. The first step must be wonder and awe as we respectfully approach the hidden presence of God, “who is the All”.

**2.** Even sensing the mystery is itself a kind of gift — and we need the grace of God as we go deeper. We give thanks to God for his gracious accompaniment.

**3.** The journey to true wisdom calls for discipline and self-control — as does anything worthwhile. But the rewards are disproportionately great — not in fame or reputation but in benefit to our fellow human beings in leading us all home to God.

## PRAYER

God, we stand before you in silent awe, because you are greater than our words, our minds and even our hearts. Never let us lose that sense of awesome and never let us mistake our poor words for the Reality which is always “unwordable.” Through Christ our Lord. Amen.



# Proclaim the message...

## ...be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable

2 Timothy 4:1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. 5 As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

2 Timothy 4:6 As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. 8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The basis for Christian proclamation is outlined in this letter: 2 Tim 3:8-9 and 16-17. Paul himself would have been happy to see his tradition placed within the biblical parameters as shown here.

### KIND OF WRITING

Vv.	2 TIMOTHY
1:1-2	Greeting
1:3-14	Thanksgiving
1:15-18	A personal note
2:1-4:8	Body of the letter
4:9-22	Personal note and prayer

Our reading is part of series of comments, constituting the charge to Timothy: 2 Tim 3:1-17, 4:1-22 The stages are as follows:

3:1-9 People to keep away from  
3:10-17 *Precedents to follow*  
4:1-5 *Final charge*

4:6-8 Paul's last testimony  
4:9-18 Final requests  
4:19-22 Closing greetings

Thus 3:14-4:2 bridges two sections in the document.

### ORIGIN OF THE READING

The best way to appreciate the context is to read 2 Tim 3:1-9, given below. Clearly there was major conflict and disruption. Consistently, Paul is put forward as *the* response: 1 Tim 1:12-16; 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11-12; 2:9-10; 3:10-12; 4:6-8.

### RELATED PASSAGES

But understand this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, opposed to what is good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, loving pleasure rather than loving God. They will maintain the outward appearance of religion but will have repudiated its power. (2 Timothy 3:1-5; see also vv. 6-9.)

### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** This is a formulaic introduction to an exhortation. The qualifications given to Jesus are a key. Firstly, there *is* going to be a judgment and the work of the evangelist will be assessed. Secondly, this judgement is grounded in the certainty of the Second Coming (lit. "epiphany"). The greatest possible significance is given thereby to the role of the preacher (no pressure, of course!).

**Verse 2** The first two words are technical terms in early Christianity. "Proclaim" (*kerygma* comes from it) means *effective proclamation*. "Word" (*logos*) is shorthand for the Gospel about Jesus. The Greek has effective word play: convenient (*eukairōs*) or not (*akairōs*), caught better in the NRSV: "whether the time is favourable or unfavourable."

**Verses 3-4** The best background for these verses is 2 Timothy 3:1-9.

**Verse 5** The writing becomes very direct and the message is unmissable.

**Verse 6** The "I" at the start (*egō*) is very strong and in sharp contrast to the "you" of the verse before. The language used here is taken from OT ceremonial: Ex. 29:40-41; Lv. 23:13; Nu. 15:5-10; 28:7. Cf. Phil 2:17 above. In the second part of the verse, the word for time is *kairos*, that is the special time of salvation. Cf. *I feel torn between the two, because I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* (Philippians 1:23 NET)

**Verse 7** These three highly significant affirmations are in parallel. The NRSV is better than the NET here:

- I have fought the good fight,
- I have finished the race,
- I have kept the faith.

7a uses the language of the athletic context, used before by the historical Paul. *Each competitor must exercise self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.* (1 Corinthians 9:25 NET)

V. 7b uses the language of the race-course (*dromos*, hence hippodrome). Cf. *Do you not know that all the runners in a stadium compete, but only one receives the prize? So run to win.* (1 Corinthians 9:24 NET)

V. 7c drops images and speaks plainly. It is not quite clear if by faith is meant "teaching" or "trust". The Pastoral tend towards faith as a creed, but perhaps both are in view here. At the time of writing, it seems, many has not persevered in the faith and, indeed, had been led astray or walked away.

**Verse 8** The writer speak of *his* hope as the hope of everyone, generalising the appeal. Crown (*stephanos*) is also a term taken from the games and used elsewhere by Paul himself (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thes. 2:19). The language shades over into apocalyptic: righteous judge, day, appearing.

### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

- When did I discover for myself the power of Scripture as the Word of God, a place of encounter?
- Being faithful to what we learned as children does not mean childish faith, of course!

### PRAYER

I thank you, O God, for your word, a lamp for my steps and a light for my path. As I open your word, may your Spirit open my heart so that your living word may truly be for me a word of life and joy. Amen.