

The Bible is full of references to the created world. Right from the very first pages we read of the sea and the sky, the land and the sea, the plants and the animals. At the end of each day of creation, we are told that God saw that it was good. It was good because it reflected God's goodness and God's care for the whole earth.

We have another example of the use of the imagery of creation in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah. This time it is the image of the rain and the snow which come down from heaven and water the earth. The seeds planted in the earth come to life and sprout. The people of the earth then have food to eat and new seed to plant in the earth. Then the cycle begins again: the rain comes, the sun shines on the earth and more food is produced. In our reading from the prophet, God likens the rain to the word of God. The word of God comes from the very heart of God. It refreshes and gives life, and then it returns to God. The rhythm of the word of God resembles the rhythm of nature. God's word continues to come to the earth and produce fruit. It is not an empty word that makes no difference. God's word is active, and it is effective. God's word is powerful, and it will renew the earth.

Jesus also liked to use the images of the natural world in his teaching. He brought them into his parables. The parables are like images that help people understand who God is and what life is like. Sometimes they are like riddles which leave us asking questions, rather than giving us clear and definite answers. In these cases, Jesus wants us to realise that the mystery of God is too deep for us to fully comprehend and understand. They remind us that there is always more we can understand about God. Our relationship with God is like any mature relationship: it is never exhausted, and it continues to deepen throughout life.

For us to understand the parable, it is important to know that in the world Jesus lived in, when someone sowed seeds, they didn't plant them in neat rows, but they scattered the seeds everywhere. This meant that some seed fell on the footpath, some on the edge of the field where there may have been lots of rocks, and some fell in the field where the soil was rich. If we understand that this was how seed was sown, and if we hear this as a parable about the word of God, then the first thing the parable tells us is that God is generous. The word of God is scattered far and wide throughout the world. God doesn't limit his word to just a few people.

Just as God's creation embraces everyone, so does his word. Everyone is touched by the word of God.

Another thing the parable tells us is that when the seed takes root in good soil, it produces abundantly. When Jesus speaks of this as one hundredfold or sixtyfold or thirtyfold, the people listening to him knew that this was a massive harvest – much more than they would normally have expected. It is the same with the word of God. When it is received and welcomed, its effect will be much greater than we could have imagined. Any of us, then, will receive from God gifts that we could never have imagined.

This brings us to the final thing that the parable tells us. Just as the seed can fall on the path or rocky ground, so the word of God can fall on deaf ears. Not everyone welcomes it with joy and enthusiasm. Not everyone perseveres in listening to the word of God.

As we have listened to these readings, they raise one basic question. How does the word of God come to us today? The first place is in the Bible, which we call the word of God. At the end of our readings at Mass, the reader concludes by saying, "The Word of the Lord", and we respond, "Thanks be to God". Because the word comes to us in the Bible, this means that when we read the Bible, we don't just do so to get information. Rather, we let the word of God shape us. It is like the rain that falls on the earth to give life. So, we listen to the word of God and let it soak into us so that we might have life in abundance.

A second place where we encounter the word of God is in the Eucharist. After all, Jesus is the Word made flesh; he is the Word of God spoken into our world. When we participate in the Eucharist, we receive the word of God into our hearts. We let that word shape us so that we become like Jesus who is the true word of God.

Another way in which we encounter the word of God is by listening to each other in such a way that we might hear the Holy Spirit speaking into the life and times that are ours. We will only be able to listen in this way if we are also encountering the word of God in the Bible and in the Eucharist. In this way, the Spirit will energise us so that we produce a hundredfold or sixtyfold or thirtyfold. In this way, the word of God will not return to God without succeeding in what it was sent to do.