

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Contrary to current public discourse, words matter; words have meaning. Today our Scripture texts are marvelously aligned calling us to reflect on the impact of God's Word on our world and in our lives. In prophecy, personal testimony, and parable we are being invited into dialogue with the God of all creation.

Isaiah proclaims that the word of God is as effective as the rain and the snow watering the earth. It always produces results. Here the Prophet is talking about God's word as a word of dialogue. He's saying that God desires and initiates relationship with creation and with us. Our God speaks to us in our own tongue, inviting us into relationship with Him.

Once heaven reaches out to earth, the horizon has changed and earth can never be the same. The coming of the Word of God invites humanity into the possibility of relationship with God, something that no one can achieve on his or her own. Whether or not we accept the invitation, the possibility will always be there. Like an open doorway cut in what used to be a solid wall, we need not go through it, but everything is different because we could. That is the heart of Isaiah's prophecy: Once the Word of God has come, nothing is the same.

While this passage of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans does not speak precisely to the care of the earth, but rather is a vision of the new creation emerging as part of God's eternal plan, it nearly begs us to read it alongside Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si, ON CARE OF OUR COMMON HOME*. This encyclical asks us to consider the imperatives of our time in light of Paul's description of the future God has planned for us.

Paul states that creation has been made subject to futility. Pope Francis elaborates on that idea saying that the earth cries out because of the harm we have inflicted on her. Our Holy Father lays the blame on the fact that we have acted like masters "entitled to plunder her at will," saying that the violence of our own hearts has sickened the soil, water, air, and all forms of life.

Paul speaks of creation's slavery to corruption and its hope of being set free. What Paul labeled as corruption, Francis names more precisely as pollution, waste, and the throwaway culture that neglects to take the needs of future generations into account.

Like St. Paul, Pope Francis mentions all of this not to make us feel guilty, but as a call to hope. St. Paul says the sufferings of this present time cannot compare with the glory to be revealed in all of creation. Pope Francis points out that God can bring good out of the evil we have caused, stating, "The Holy Spirit possesses infinite creativity which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, including the most complex and inscrutable.

Both the Apostle and the Pope are challenging us to evaluate what we do in the light of the fact that we and our entire universe are on a path toward union with God. St. Paul reminds us of our

destiny to give us a perspective on suffering, while Pope Francis reminds us that we share that destiny with all of creation. Together, they call us to action built on God's Word spoken to us.

This prophetic letter of Pope Francis, written in 2015, gave impetus to the Paris Climate Change Accord in 2016 agreed to by 195 nations, including our own. This year the President withdrew from the Accord, raising the ominous concern of the community of nations that our nation's word does not mean anything; does not matter. It can be changed by political whim.

Doesn't this give deeper meaning to St. Paul's word: "...all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."?

This rumination on our responsibility for and relationship to all of creation leads us into Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed. God being the sower; the seed being his Word; and the soil being our hearts and souls receiving the seed and bearing fruit or not.

Before we reflect on this parable, I ask you to step back with me a moment to consider what is going on here. While we are talking about the impact of God's Word on creation and on us, the question that must be asked, "Are we ready to really listen?" For instance, I stand up here week after week, talking; giving a homily. I can't help but wonder if anybody here remembers a word that I spoke last week. What was my homily about last week? Don't worry about it. I'm not sure I remember. The fact is that most of us remember very little of what we are told. That's why I often tell stories in my homilies. Most people will remember a good story. And I had a great teacher in that—Jesus. While St. John tells us that Jesus said many other things that were never written down, the things that are written were given that we might believe in Him. As a result all four Gospels are filled with stories that Jesus told. We call them parables, which mean they are stories that offer a deeper message.

Now this parable of the sower and the seed, though not one of the more popular ones like The Prodigal Son, is rather easy to understand because Jesus explains it Himself. However, this Gospel hints at what it takes to receive the Word of God, that is, what constitutes the "good soil" of the parable. We see what that means by looking to the disciples who admitted that Jesus had confused them. "Why do you speak to them in parables?" was a question that really meant, "We don't get it!" That was exactly the attitude, the humility, they needed for Jesus to be able to break through to them, for the seed of His Word to go deep into their hearts and their souls. When it comes to having ears to hear, this Gospel suggests that questions are often more fruitful than answers.

Please allow me to try to explain with a story of a woman who was frantic when she discovered her daughter was missing in the Pocono Mountains. This woman thrashed through the woods, screaming her daughter's name. She went back to the campsite and called for help. Within a half an hour, a search team had been organized. It began sweeping the area, calling out at regular intervals for the little girl.

The Mother sat down on a rock for a moment to rest. How would she ever find her little girl? She was listening for her daughter's voice, but all she could hear was the volunteer search team pounding through the woods, calling to her daughter and to one another. She soon realized that she and the volunteers were making so much noise that they could not hear the child if she was yelling or crying. She asked everyone to stand down; to be quiet; be silent.

The Mother listened. Nothing! She listened harder. Every pore of her body, every fiber, every muscle strained to hear the one voice she would recognize above all others. Then she heard her little girl calling for her. By carefully listening and following the sound of her voice, the woman was reunited with her daughter.

The “good soil” of our hearts and minds often need a quiet place to listen for God's Word so that it can become fruitful and yield “a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold”. Of course, that is the most important part of what prayer is all about—listening. We need to make time to simply spend time in God's presence. Some people call it centering prayer.

When asked by an interviewer what she said to God when she prayed, Mother Teresa answered, “Nothing! I just listen.” When asked what God said to her as she prayed, she replied, “Nothing! God listens!” Then she added, “If you don't understand what I am talking about, I can't explain it to you.”

I learned this form of prayer many years ago, not in the Seminary, but in what was called “A Tarry Service” in a little store-front church in North Philadelphia called St. Paul's Church of God in Christ. There a group of 10 of us or so gathered for this “Tarry Service”, which consisted in simply tarrying (or waiting) with the Lord while He spoke to our hearts. It was an all-night service. So we waited. We tarried. A group of a couple of friends and a few strangers. No words were spoken. After some time, I can't tell you how long, all self-consciousness passed and a longing for God filled the void, the emptiness, the silence, the darkness. The darkness of the night passed into the pale light of dawn peeping through the draped window and I felt blessed by a peace that came not with quietude, but with strength and a kind of empowerment.

We ended the service with a brief praise to God for his generous love, embraced each other with peace and love, and each went his and her own way to serve the Lord with all of our hearts.

It is that gift of listening for God to speak His Word to my heart, knowing that He is listening to my heart, that has enabled me to continue to try to serve Him all these forty some years.

It is in this prayerful attitude that I have been empowered to relate the Word of God and the teaching of the Church to what Our Holy Father considers one of the most critical issues of our time, knowing that my words will be brushed aside by some as “Victor being political again”. However, my hope is that some will be encouraged to read “Laudato Si”—On Care for Our Common Home. Then, in light of the Word of God and the teaching of the Church prayerfully

come to your own conclusion with regard to the President's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Accord and how you will respond.

Jesus told a parable: A sower went forth to sow. Some of the seed fell by the wayside and the birds devoured it. Some fell on hard ground and withered because the young plants could not put down deep roots. Some fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them. But some of the seed fell on good ground and they brought forth fruit—in some cases a hundred-fold. The seed falling on good soil, he later explained “refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

What is the condition of the soil of your heart and soul? It's simply a matter of listening. Tarry with the Lord! Listen to Him as He listens to your heart.