

SESSION 6: THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

COMMIT - DAY 1: THE VOICE OF GOD

“The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.” – Psalm 29:7

Much of the action in the early chapters of Mark’s Gospel takes place around – and on – the Sea of Galilee. In Mark 4, Jesus delivers several parables and teachings from a boat off the shore. Biblical commentaries often note that because sound travels so well over water, speaking from a boat a little way off the shore would have created a natural amplification effect and allowed the crowds to hear Jesus’s voice more easily. Be that as it may, Saint Mark almost certainly has something more than the practicalities of public speaking in mind when he shares the location from which Jesus taught.

As this session’s video teaching pointed out, Mark 4:1 in the Greek literally reads “so that he got into a boat and sat on the sea.” Mark is not simply relating the fact that Jesus was in a boat that was floating on the water – he is evoking an Old Testament image of the Lord enthroned on the sea.

Read Mark 4:1-3 and Psalm 29. What words, images, or ideas do these two passages have in common?

Psalm 29 leads God’s people in a hymn of praise to the Lord. It reflects on the power and majesty of God, whose voice none can resist. At the end of the psalm, the Lord is pictured “enthroned over the flood,” demonstrating his power and authority over all creation – even the strongest and most chaotic elements, such as the sea.

But Psalm 29 is not the first place in the Old Testament where we encounter the image of the voice of the Lord moving over the waters. In fact, this is one of the very first images we find in the Scriptures. Read Genesis 1:1-8. What do you think the waters represent? What power does the voice of God have?

In Genesis, the Lord speaks and the cosmos comes into being. In Psalm 29, the Lord speaks and all creation trembles. The one whose power and authority brought creation into being has the power and authority to command his creation.

In Mark 4, Jesus the Incarnate Word of God, sits on the sea, and the first words Mark records the voice of God speaking to the crowd are: “Listen!... He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:3, 9). Jesus’s command to listen and to hear echoes the great command of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-5) “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your might.” This command is known as the Shema which in Hebrew means “hear.” It is not only a command; it is the most important Jewish prayer. The meaning of the word *shema* includes more than simply “to hear”; in addition to listening, it also includes obeying. It was- and is- an invitation to relationship.

When Jesus evokes the *Shema* by beginning his teaching with the command to listen, he is not just offering new knowledge: he is inviting us to faith. Look up Romans 10:14-17. What does Saint Paul say about the relationship between faith and hearing? How does this affect the way you read (or hear) Jesus’s parables?

Jesus's invitation to faith is continually offered by his Apostles, sent out to preach the Gospel, and by their successors. In fact, the famous eight-century scholar Saint Bede the Venerable interpreted the boat Jesus taught from in Mark 4 as prefiguring the Church, which would continue to preach the Gospel throughout the world: "Now this ship shewed in a figure the Church, to be built in the midst of the nations, in which the Lord consecrates for Himself a beloved dwelling-place." (Bede, on Mark 4:1, Catena Aurea, Vol. 2)

COMMIT - DAY 2: THEY SHOULD TURN

Many of Jesus's parables are somewhat puzzling. He often takes familiar images and turns them on their head, like that of a sower scattering seed with no apparent regard for the type of soil on which it might land. And sometimes his explanations seem even more mysterious than the parables themselves: "And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may need see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven'" (Mark 4:11-13).

Because Jesus draws the images for his parables from the Old Testament, we won't be able to make sense of the explanations for them if we remove them from that context. In the explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus is referencing a message God has already delivered to his people. Isaiah was a scribe for several of the kings of Judah. God calls Isaiah from being a royal scribe to become a divine scribe, God's spokesman and prophet to his people. Read God's first message for the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6:8-13. What do you think God means when he talks about a heart that is fat, ears that are heavy, and eyes that are shut? What do these things prevent us from doing?

Isaiah understands that God's desire is truly for his people to "turn and be healed." His response to God's first message is to ask, "How long?" How long will this failure to understand and perceive persist? Read Isaiah 6:11-13. What is God's answer?

This seems rather harsh. Wouldn't it be easier for God to make the people understand right away, without going through the suffering of the Exile? But that isn't how God works. He doesn't force us to see, to hear, and to understand; he invites us.

"Basically, God's true 'Parable' is Jesus himself, his Person who, in the sign of humanity, hides and at the same time reveals his divinity. In this manner God does not force us to believe in him but attracts us to him with the truth and goodness of his incarnate Son: love, in fact, always respects freedom."

-Pope Benedict XVI (Angelus Address, July 10, 2011)

Many things get in the way of us hearing and responding God. Sometimes we even put obstacles in our own way. This was Judah's problem when God sent Isaiah to speak to them. It wasn't that they were trying to hear God but failing to understand because his message was difficult – they weren't even trying to listen in the first place. They had put other things before God, and so their eyes and ears and hearts weren't working properly.

God had to remove the obstacles of pride and disobedience with which his people had barricaded themselves so that they could ultimately "turn and be healed." The only way to remove the obstacle of pride is through humility – the Exile put God's people in a position to learn humility. The suffering they endured when they were conquered and taken away from their land was meant to lead to conversion.

The Exile was a punishment for the people's disobedience, but it wasn't vengeful. Rather, the Exile was a difficult but merciful lesson in humility and obedience.

So, when Jesus tells his Apostles that he is speaking to the crowds in parable "lest they should turn again, and be forgiven" (Mark 4:12), he is saying that this generation, especially its leaders the scribes and Pharisees, just like the people of Isaiah's time, have fat hearts and heavy ears and shut eyes. And just like Isaiah's generation, they will need to learn humility through suffering before they will be able to see and hear and understand.

But this time it will not just be God's people who suffer through the purification. God's own Son will suffer for his people, so that in and with him they can learn true and perfect humility. Judah didn't fully understand Isaiah's message until after the Exile. The people of Jesus's day-including his followers-don't fully understand his message until after Jesus suffers and dies. It is only at Jesus's Death that we hear the words, on the lips of the centurion, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Not only does the mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection fully reveal his identity as the Son of God, but it also opens up the path of humility and purification for us to have our ears, eyes, and hearts opened to hear, see, and understand.

How can the humility of suffering – especially when united to the Passion of Our Lord- heal us of fat hearts, heavy ears, and shut eyes?

***"No man can attain to the knowledge of God but by humility.
The way to mount high is to descend."***

-Blessed Giles of Assisi-

COMMIT - DAY 3: LECTIO: JESUS EXPLAINS

The parable of the sower lays a kind of foundations for all the rest of Jesus's parables. It teaches us how we are supposed to listen to the Word of God and reveals what the Word is supposed to do in our hearts. After telling the parable to the crowd, Jesus teaches his Apostles what it means. It is a familiar parable to us who have had the benefit of the Apostles' teaching for the last 2,000 years, but we must still read and reflect carefully to make sure we are hearing and understanding what our Lord wants to say to us.

LECTIO: The practice of praying with Scripture begins with an active and close reading of the Scripture passage. Read the verse below and then answer the questions to take a closer look at some of the details of the passage.

The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them. And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the one sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

- Mark 4:14-20 -

What is the sower sowing?

What do the different types of ground represent?

Hard Ground	
Rocky Ground	
Ground with thorn bushes	
Good soil	

What actions do the people represented by the good soil take?

MEDITATIO: *Lectio*, a close reading and rereading is followed by *meditation*, a time to reflect on the Scripture passage and to ponder the reasons for particular events, descriptions, details, phrases, and even echoes from other Scripture passages that were noticed during *lectio*. Take some time now to meditate on the above verse.

“And how can it be reasonable, says one, to sow among the thorns, on the rock, on the wayside? With regard to the seeds and the earth it cannot be reasonable; but in the case of men’s souls and their instructions, it has its praise and that abundantly. For the husbandman indeed would reasonably be blamed for doing this; it being impossible for the rock to become earth, or the wayside not to be a wayside, or the thorns, thorns; but in the things that have reason it is not so. There is such a thing as the rock changing, and becoming rich land; and the wayside being no longer trampled on, nor lying open to all that pass by, but that it may be a fertile field; and the thorns may be destroyed and the seed enjoy full security. For had it been impossible, the Sower would not have sown. And if the change did not take place in all, this is not fault of the Sower, but of them who are unwilling to be changed: He having done His part; and if they betrayed what they received of Him, He is blameless, the exhibitor of such love to man.

-Saint John Chrysostom, Homily 44 on Matthew

How does God sow his word in your life?

What kind of soil do you think your heart is most like right now? Why?

What can you do to work the soil of your heart to make it more fertile (soften the hard path, remove rocks, pull out thorns and weeds, etc.)?

ORATIO, CONTEMPLATIO, RESOLUTIO: Having read and meditates on today's Scripture passage, take some time to pray – bringing your thoughts to God (*oratio*) – and to be receptive to God's grace in silence (*contemplation*). Then end your prayer by making a simple concrete resolution (*resolution*) to respond to God's prompting of you heart in today's prayer.

“Be changed while ye may: turn up with the plough the hard ground, cast the stones out of the field, pluck up the thorns out of it. Be loth to retain that hard heart, from which the word of God may quickly pass away and be lost. Be loth to have that lightness of soil, where the root of charity can take no deep hold. Be loth to choke the good seed which is sown in you by my labors, with the lusts and the cares of this world. For it is the Lord who sows; and we are only His laborers. But be ye the good ground.”

-Saint Augustine (Sermon 3 on the New Testament) -

COMMIT - DAY 4: PURGATORY

Regarding Purgatory, Catholics often get the question, Where is that in the Bible?!"Among the many doctrines that wear routinely called upon to explain and defend, Purgatory holds a prime position. There are references to Heaven and Hell throughout both the Old and New Testaments, but the word "purgatory" never appears in Scripture. The *Catechism* defines Purgatory as the final purification after death for those who die in a state of grace but not of absolute perfection. This purification is described as a "cleansing fire" (see CCC, 1030-1031). It is not the punishment of Hell, but is not – yet-the full joy of Heaven. The Church fully articulated this doctrine at the Councils of Florence (fifteenth century) and Trent (sixteenth century), but the roots of this doctrine go all the way back to the Old Testament.

Read 2 Maccabees 12:38-45. What do Judas Maccabeus and his army of faithful Jews do for their fallen comrades? How is this similar to or different from what we as Catholic do for the dead?

From this account in 2 Maccabees, we see that already in the second century BC the Jewish belief in the afterlife included some kind of purification after death. And a crucial aspect of this belief is the point that our prayers can have an effect on this purification.

Why would this purification be necessary? Why would someone who dies in friendship with God not go straight to Heaven? The answer lies even further back in the Old Testament.

Look up God's calling of Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-8. Read this passage slowly and carefully, placing yourself in the scene. How do you think Isaiah felt when he received this vision? Why do you think he said what he did? How do you think he felt afterward?

This passage from Isaiah illustrates both why Purgatory is necessary and what we can expect if to be like. Isaiah was already a good and righteous man, but he wasn't perfect. And he recognized that nothing imperfect can survive in the presence of the thrice-holy God. Before Isaiah could become God's representative to the people, he had to be conformed to God's holiness. The encounter with God's

perfect love burns away everything that is not of God-not only actual sin, but every imperfection and attachment.

“Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and save is Christ himself, the Judge and Savior. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves.... His gaze, the touch of his hear heals us through an undeniably painful transformation ‘as through fire.’ But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God.”

-Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salve*, 47 -

The New Testament further expounds on this necessity of being purified through fire before being able to enter into the presence of God. Look up 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and 1 Peter 1:6-7. What light do these passages shed on the doctrine of Purgatory? What inspiration do they offer for the here and now?

Purgatory: More a process than a place

Pope Benedict XVI made this point in his general audience on January 12, 2011, where he discussed the life of Saint Catherin of Genoa. Saint Catherin (1447-1510) was an Italian noblewoman who lived a life of intimate prayer and intense service to the poor and sick. She also wrote a treatise on Purgatory, Pope Benedict tells us: “For [Catherine][Purgatory] is not an exterior but rather an interior fire... We too feel how distant we are, how full we are of so many things that we cannot see God. The soul is aware of the immense love and perfect justice of God and consequently suffers for having failed to respond in a correct and perfect way to his love; and love for God itself becomes a flame, love itself cleanses it from the residue of sin.... With her life Saint Catherine teaches us that the more we love God and enter into intimacy with him in prayer the more he makes himself know to us, setting our hears on fire with his love.”

-Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience January 12, 2011

COMMIT - DAY 5: TRUTH AND BEAUTY

Sermon on the Mount

Henrik Olrik, c. 1860, St. Matthew’s Church, Vesterbro district of Copenhagen, Denmark

The full painting can be found at:
[https://wikivisual.com/wiki/ File:](https://wikivisual.com/wiki/File:Sankt_Matthaeus_Kirke_Copenha_gen_altarpiece.jpg)

[Sankt_Matthaeus_Kirke_Copenha
gen_altarpiece.jpg](https://wikivisual.com/wiki/File:Sankt_Matthaeus_Kirke_Copenha_gen_altarpiece.jpg)



Saint Mark's fourth chapter is one of the rare times in his Gospel that we have an extended teaching of Jesus. In fact, it's one of only two extended teachings in all of Mark's Gospel. This first, in Mark 4, takes place beside the Sea of Galilee. The second, in Mark 13, takes place in Jerusalem, as Jesus and his disciples sit on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple.

While Mark doesn't give us the extended teaching, or even the Sermon on the Mount, as do the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, it is clear that Jesus's teaching is a central part of his ministry. Mark repeatedly describes Jesus teaching and preaching. Look up the following verses. What does Mark describe?

Scripture Verses	What does Mark describe?
Mark 1:21-22	
Mark 1:38-39	
Mark 2:2	
Mark 4:1-2	
Mark 6:2	

Our art image for today's reflection is *the Sermon on the Mount* by Henrik Olrik (1830-1890). Olrik originally studied as a sculptor and later moved to Paris, where he studied painting. Sought after as a portrait painter, he also painted landscapes, still lifes, and religious works. His *Sermon on the Mount* is one of his most famous works and is located in Saint Matthew's Church, one of the oldest churches in the Versterbro district of Copenhagen. Olrik's *Sermon on the Mount* is the church's altarpiece, a large mural painted directly on the wall behind the altar. The above image is the center portion of the much larger *Sermon on the Mount* altarpiece.

Even in this smaller section of the full mural painting, we see a crowd gathered around Jesus as he teaches. While the painting is filled with a crowd of people, Jesus is the central figure and takes center stage. The brilliant red and blue of his tunic and robe are striking, particularly as compared to the more muted and neutral colors of the crowd, and draw the viewer's attention straight to our Lord. As we saw in *The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew* by Duccio in Session 3, Jesus' tunic and robe are distinct in color—the red tunic, representing Jesus's divinity, covered by the blue robe, representing his humanity—pictorially presenting God made man.

To emphasize Jesus's divinity, Olrik has placed an incandescent halo around his head. Jesus's right hand is extended in blessing and, as we saw in the icon of *Jesus the Teacher* in Session 5, Jesus's fingers are set in the position of the ICXC Christogram, identifying himself, as well as confessing the Trinity and the Incarnation. In Olrik's work there is no doubt that God himself is teaching his people on the mountaintop, hearkening back to God's giving of the Old Testament Law on Mount Sinai at the time of the Exodus. Jesus's teaching is a new Law for the New Covenant.

The crowd gathers around Jesus. The disciples stand on either side of him, listening intently to his teaching. Behind Jesus and the disciples, we see a portion of the crowd, although in the full mural the crowd extends much further in all directions. But even in this smaller center section of the mural, we see men and women, young and old, each with varying facial expressions. The man and woman just to the right behind Jesus have anxious looks of concern regarding what they are hearing. Maybe they are struck by Jesus's words that one is not to be angry or insult one's brother, or that looking lustfully on a woman is to commit adultery in one's heart (see Matthew 5:21-28)? The young woman to the left behind Jesus serenely listens to all Jesus is saying. Perhaps the pureness of her heart has allowed her to see the Lord God before her (see Matthew 5:8). Just to the left of this young woman, however, a man with an angry face has begun to turn away. Is he one of the scribes or Pharisees, convinced that Jesus is a blasphemer? Or is he perhaps Judas the Apostle, the delight of riches already beginning to choke out the word he has heard?

But even as we observe the crowd, we can't help but be drawn once more back to Jesus our Lord. His commanding presence witnesses to the authority with which he speaks. Our eyes are fixed, our hearts filled with wonder at the gospel message he proclaims. And our heart echoes the words of Peter in response to one of Jesus's teachings, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Take a moment to journal your ideas, questions, or insights about this lesson. Write down thought you had that may not have been mentioned in the text or the discussion questions. List any personal applications you got from the lessons. What challenged you the most in the teachings? How might you turn what you've learned into specific action?