15th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

From time to time we all bump into the truth about ourselves that there is a gap between what we say and what we do, between what we profess to be and how we actually behave. Of course, often we notice this inconsistency more easily in others. One of life's disappointments is to discover people who will promise you anything without holding themselves accountable for what they say. Their word is worthless. But sometimes our own words are no bargains either: we lie, we draw back, we decorate the truth with so many disguises that it becomes unrecognizable.

In sharp contrast to the fragility of the human word, the word of God is seen to be always effective because of who God is- as described in the Book of Numbers:
God is no man that he should lie,
No son of Adam to draw back,
Is it his way to say and not to do,
To speak and not to fulfil ? (Numbers 23:19)

For God, to speak is the same thing as to do, to promise is the same thing as to fulfil. God's word creates what it says; he speaks the world into existence; when he says "Let there be…..", there is. From today's first reading we hear about the great power of God's word. As the rain waters the earth and makes all things grow, so the word of God accomplishes what it is sent to do. It is not an empty word; it is a powerful word which brings about the purposes of God. As God's word made the first beginning, so it also makes new beginnings.

One of the ways the evangelists show that Jesus speaks the word of God is by showing us how Jesus speaks with authority, unlike other religious leaders. So we see Jesus in the Gospels speaking a word that is seen to be effective. In his healing ministry he *speaks* people better – so much so that the centurion can send him a message: "Say but the word and my servant shall be healed." Jesus commands; he rebukes; he orders. When he speaks, something happens. People who are open to his creative word are seen to leave his presence changed: something happens to them. In that change they see themselves differently, they see Jesus in a new light, they can face the future with new hope.

But there is another word that Jesus speaks, a word that is *offered* to others and depends on their response if it is to be truly effective. This word is like a seed that is sown by Jesus, a seed that depends on the

condition of the ground if it is to grow and bear fruit. This we hear in the parable of the sower. In the interpretation a variety of responses to the word of God is explored through four types of hearers. Firstly, there are those who hear the word without understanding it, and the word is easily taken from them by those who oppose its power. Secondly, there are those whose first enthusiasm for the word cannot withstand trial because the word has never taken root in them. Thirdly, there are those who hear the word but are overcome by a litany of distractions and lose it. Finally, there are those who hear the word and understand it, who take it to heart and make it their own, and yield a harvest through their persistence.

The last group of hearers are the model for true Christian discipleship: in giving the word of God a secure place in their heart, in making efforts to understand it, their co-operation ensures that this word becomes an event in the Christian life. Discipleship enables the preached word to become a fruitful *thing*, not just a word.

Underlying the parable there is a telling confidence: in spite of all the obstacles present in the various types of soil, the good news is that the seed does succeed in growing and producing a rich harvest. The word of God preached by Jesus, despite apparent failure and repeated opposition, will enjoy great fruitfulness – symbolized by the hundredfold of the harvest's yield. The message of Jesus will be heard and enacted; the word of God risked in so many unlikely places will not be an empty word but will bear fruit.

Today the word of God is still scattered generously, with throwaway style. God still risks his word, hoping that people will take to it, welcome it, and make it their own. How would we describe our own responses to the word ? Does it take root in us ? Do we make serious efforts to understand it and know what it's asking of us ? Do we welcome it with great show and then go on our own sweet way anyway ? Do we hear it and then smother it with our own concerns ? Only we can answer the questions when we allow the parable to question us. And no one can do that for us.

But we should be patient with ourselves. Like all seeds, the word of God takes time to grow. The sower knows that he has to wait for the weather, the secret workings of the soil, the slow thrust of life, before he can see the crops emerge. The sower cannot deny the time the whole process takes. God who sows the seed knows what it means to plant his word in different people in different situations. It all takes time. But if we take the time to nourish the word of God within us, God will wait on the gradual

process. It might take us a lifetime. But if we allow the seed to struggle to grow in us, we will grow too. Eventually the word of God and our own word might become one. And that would be a harvest indeed.