

Disappointment

By Abbot David Altman, OCSO

Before we know it we will be in the season of sowing, which is an important concept used in the New Testament Biblical literature. The Lord used this concept to great advantage in His parables about the nature of His kingdom and how we are to arrive at the Kingdom.

The Christian life in its many aspects is always a seed-planting activity. We offer to others, we sow the seeds of the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—with words and actions and prayers. Our communicative habits are the vehicles by which faith is transmitted, and especially for us men of prayer, this process is a hidden one. That is a problem.

In our world we measure success in terms of visible results. If you can't see it, then it isn't there. Value is defined in terms of a good proportion between input and output, and there is a lot to say for that principle. What is the use of all the effort, when there is little gained by the effort? We can be disappointed in the results of our lives of prayers, and allow this disappointment to grow, until it becomes an attitude of discouragement and futility, and eventually motivation to lead a life of prayer is destroyed or reduced to a weakness that makes it virtually meaningless. We turn to other activities where we can see immediate results, and make them our priorities.

We are not too far away from our own farm experience to be aware of the kinds of effort involved. Let us say one of our neighbors owning a huge field, bought just a small amount of seed. He might think with apparent logic that he wants to test the seed and see how it grows before he invests a lot of labor in it. Why work so hard if the stuff won't produce? That seems smart enough. He proceeds to plant one seed, waters it over the growing season, to prepare it for the harvest.

By the time he finds out whether the one seed would produce, the growing season is over. We can all see through the faulty logic of this farmer, who could never make a living this way, never mind helping other people by contributing to the market. Yet we may be inclined to the same basic attitude and approach. Why invest our precious gifts of time and energy in some interior, intellectual activity like prayer, without becoming reasonably sure of success?

I often find that when people confess their sins, they neglect to confess their lack of trust in God's providential care. They also show a corresponding lack of faith. God is not a part of their decision-making process, and so God is not enough a part of their lives.

It is God who guarantees the quality of the Gospel seed, and that is what all seeds of faith are: expressions of the Good News that Christ has come to save us from ourselves. God is hidden, and so His work is largely hidden, and He works through us in hidden ways. Acceptance of this hidden process is our principle for successfully living out our lives of prayer.

The difficulty is, what we know about the workings of the principle of sowing seeds of faith and love can also be a source of discouragement. Why work so hard when we know what is going to happen to perhaps much of our work? I am reminded of Christ's agony in the garden. Perhaps the greatest agony for Christ was the sight of future ages and all the people for whom His ultimate sacrifice would be useless.

The quality of the Gospel seed is divinely guaranteed, but the results in terms of human acceptance is not at all dependable. Everything depends on the soil of individual human minds and hearts that receive the seed. We are only the sowers, and God makes the seed grow, if you remember St. Paul. Once we have done our work, our vows of poverty come into play. Let it go.

There are three principles for success in life: I love you (that is, I practice unrelenting good will toward you); wait a minute, let's re-examine a situation for better results; and let it go. Most people's problems consist in carrying too much baggage around with them.

You have done your work, perhaps, only with your prayer. In contrast to the faulty thinking of the poor farmer, the more seed you sow, the better the spiritual harvest that will be reaped, probably by others. Remember the law of averages, if nothing else. The return on our investment of personal effort is great according to God's plan, and so there is no cause for disappointment or discouragement. It has been said that sometimes our disappointments are God's appointments. The Lord arranges all things splendidly for our salvation, as we sing now at Tierce. God weaves many seemingly small events into a series of impressions to win over people's minds and hearts. These impressions are the seeds of faith and love. The seed of faith we once planted, for example, and never saw anything come of it, has been lying dormant, perhaps for years. We gave up on that seed a long time ago, but someone finally comes along to water it, and it grows for a good harvest.

The attractive analogy with farming is accurate even further here. Years ago in Mexico, seeds were discovered from the ancient Aztec civilization that were still alive. They were planted and germinated. We just do not know the when and where of the results of our efforts for God, but we do know that they are for God, and His infinite power to create can recreate and change everything. What He asks of us is prayer. That is the basic reason our world is in the state of moral decline: not enough people are praying, and not enough of us are praying enough. God makes us responsible for inviting Him into the world. After all, would you go where you're not wanted?

Perhaps at this point we can see the basic problematic attitude that keeps us from our full potential as people of prayer: our hopes for success are more or less based on our own planning or presentation. The first step in success is to acknowledge that by ourselves we cannot win. It is the Lord who does the winning. And His infinite desire to see us succeed in winning people for faith and love is infinitely greater than our finite desires. In His generosity, God invites many people to play their parts in a series of events that He organized to win

someone's mind and heart. We have to fight an inclination to play God and do all the work ourselves.

We have a responsibility to pray, to speak, to plan, as our participation in God's greater plan. Everyone has a part to play, and the foundation-virtue of humility asks us to recognize the role of our lives as a part. God alone is the great orchestra-leader, and no one can arrogate to himself God's role.

During the last visitation at Sonoita, Mother Miriam and I were talking about vocations, and we agreed that we have been given the best of them all. The Lord employs many to give impressions or seeds of faith to others, but we are the ones He has chosen to emphasize the force given to those impressions through prayer. Remember our Lord's observation of the importance of prayer, the prayer that moves mountains and expressed the faith that works miraculous healings.

Of course not every seed we plant will bear fruit in the way we would plan, but we know through faith that if we sow enough seed, we can be assured of a harvest. The point is clear: if our efforts at prayer are not producing seeable results, that is not the excuse to give up, but the reason to persevere in prayer. Again, the more input there is in a given situation, the greater possible output.

God makes appointments with our efforts, often at a much later time. The work we have done is held dormant for a time, maybe many years, and then grace is given to make the memory of a long past statement or act, work to impress someone with the reality of faith. After years of resistance and rejection, people come to truth, not just to initial faith, but to greater faith, greater personal conversion. That is the work we perform with each other, for each other, and it is the meaning of the saying that no one goes to heaven alone, but brings many with him. No one goes to hell alone, but invites others to go with him.

I like telling people that I pray for them because I want to take at least part credit for all the good that happens to them. When they ask if I will take credit for the problems and failures they have, I can respond that at least they have someone to blame. That is an important concept as well: that when a world of local situation turns out badly, it can be blamed, at least in part, on a person assigned by God to a life of prayer, who is not doing His work well enough.

Each impression we give to someone, whether interior or exterior, is a Gospel seed. The human mind and heart are the field. Maybe those minds and hearts are hardened by ignorance, prejudice, or even malice, but we know that even the hardness of granite has been cracked by the seed of a bush or tree that lodges in an opening. God makes openings. We also know the long-term, persevering effort of water upon rocks, how they are worn away over time. The hardest resistance can be worn away by persevering prayer.

The more seed of good words and actions we sow, the more we have. The Divine provider of seed will understandably give His work to good workers. We can be consoled that the Gospel is

renewed year after year. Once the process is begun, those who accept God's word pass on that word, spreading the truth and love of God beyond the perimeters of their lives.

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