

Thursday in the Fourth Week after the Epiphany: Mass January 28, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 1, Epiphany 3: Hebrews 10:19–25; Psalm 24:1–6; Mark 4:21–25

Because of the commemoration yesterday of Gregory of Nyssa, we did not hear the Parable of the Sower and the interpretation the disciples needed to understand it.¹ Matthew and Luke have it also from Mark.² It's about the word sown along the path, upon rocky ground, and among thorns. The passage concludes, "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."³ The evangelist we know as Mark follows this with the Parable of the Lamp and the Parable of the Measure.

As far as we know, Paul is the only named apostle whose writing we know. The apostles who knew Jesus were preachers. Stories are retold and changed in the retelling. Some are written and rewritten. Some might wonder why there should be anything hard to understand about God and God's love and mercy.

The Revised Standard Version's "Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get"⁴ is language from the King James Version of the Bible. I think Professor Joel Marcus' translation in his commentary gives us a contemporary sense of the Greek. He begins, "Pay attention to what you hear!" These words suggest that you and I have choices about how God's word will unfold in our lives.

A couple of years ago, when Robert Willis, dean of Canterbury, was with us, I asked about a book that would give me a better sense of British public life in the course of conversation. I was surprised by him recommending

¹ Mark 4:1–20.

² Matthew 13:1–9; Luke 8:4–8.

³ Mark 4:20.

⁴ Mark 4:24.

Charles Moore's biography of Margaret Thatcher.⁵ I often get lost in the weeds, as it were, of British government while reading it. The search function on my iPad helps one learn to remember that the abbreviation PSBR stands for "Public Sector Borrowing Requirement"—Britspeak, if I may, for what we call the federal budget deficit.

I think I knew already that Mrs. Thatcher was a practicing Christian. But I was surprised that one of her favorite hymns is one that is no longer in our hymnal. Its words were taken from a poem by an American, James Russell Lowell, born in 1819 and died in 1891. He was a poet, essayist, Harvard professor, minister to Spain, and ambassador to the United Kingdom.⁶ He was a committed abolitionist. In 1845, Lowell wrote a poem to protest the war with Mexico.

The three verses that make up *The Hymnal 1940's* text were taken from a poem that begins,

*When a deed is done for freedom, through the broad earth's aching breast
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on was from east to west,
And the slave, where'er he cowers, feels the soul within him climb.*

These lines were taken from this poem. I will read the first and last verses.

*Once to every man and nation Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, Off'ring each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by for ever 'Twixt that darkness and that light.*

The final verse:

Though the cause of evil prosper, Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;

⁵ Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography At Her Zenith In London, Washington and Moscow* ebook (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), s.v. "James Russell Lowell."

⁶ *The Hymnal 1940 Companion*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1951), 489.

*Though her portion be the scaffold, And upon the throne be wrong,
Yet that scaffold sways the future, And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow Keeping watch above his own.*

I come back to Marcus' translation of Jesus' words for all of us, "Pay attention to what you hear!"

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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