

## Sermon for the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Dearly Beloved,

When I was trained to preach by the Dominicans, I consistently received the criticism that I was too serious. Today we have two serious readings, so serious that one could think they were accidentally transferred by a sleepy scribe from a weekday in Lent to this ninth Sunday after Pentecost. Serious readings and a serious preacher make for a very serious homily, which I don't want to give today and you likely don't want to hear. So instead of dwelling on the gravity of today's Mass readings, let us consider an image from the Gospel connected to today's reading.

What we heard in the Gospel of today is from Luke, chapter 19, as Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He weeps over the city and wishes it would have been open to Him when He came to save it. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus makes a similar lament, but there He adds, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which kills the prophets and stones those sent to you, how often have I wished to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not have it?" By considering these two texts together, we can easily see that the Lord's sorrow over Jerusalem and her people was very great: He wept, which He rarely did, as far as we know, and He said He was like a mother weeping for her children, wishing He could have protected them as a hen does her chicks.

We know from even a cursory reading of the Gospels that Jesus liked to use images when He preached, and those images were almost always drawn from the world of nature or from agriculture. There are the parables of the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, the tree that bears good fruit or bad fruit, the grain of wheat that dies and then bears fruit. And in St. John's Gospel, there are the 'I AM' sayings such as the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, the True Vine, all agricultural or natural images of the Savior.

Why did Jesus use such images of nature to teach us? There are many reasons why, but three suffice for us this morning. First, to have something that sticks in our minds and in our imagination. Jesus did not say, "I am the Unmoved Mover" or "I am the Efficient Cause," though he could have rightly said such things. Unmoved Mover does not quite stick in the mind like the Good Shepherd or True Vine, which unite our intellects and imaginations and so engage our whole being and help us better consider divine truths.

A second reason for images is they appeal to everyone: they appeal to the straightforward because the meaning is clear: in the parable of the Sower, we want to be like the fruitful crop, not like the other seeds; I must protect my faith from being eaten, dried up or choked. The image keeps the teaching from being too abstract. Images appeal to the contemplative because the deeper meaning can be considered for years without exhaustion, for Christ's words are divine words, and so even the simplest image has an eternal quality. So, in the parable of the Sower, can we be many seeds at once? Can we both bring forth fruit and be choked by the thorns and the same time? Why does Jesus sow seed in places where he knows it will be eaten by Satan? These are questions we can ponder for the rest of our lives.

A third reason for images is one we might not think of: they are to refocus our attention towards natural things, which then serve as a bridge to supernatural things. St. John says that no one has seen God, but by using images, Jesus has taught us that certain natural things are like God and certain natural things are like human beings in their relation to God. Thus the current culture's divorce from nature and from farming is not a happy thing; it means that we have less means at our disposal to know and love God. The simple farmhand who milks the cows and sows the crops and prunes the trees and feeds the chickens has a lot more possibility of knowing God than does the typical man of our day who habitually avoids nature by such inventions as central air, supermarkets and bright street lamps. He never sees the sun rise nor the stars twinkle; he lives in accord with his cell phone. And so, in whatever we can re-attune ourselves to nature and to farming, we are not only enriching our lives and making them more human, we are opening ourselves to the divine.

To return to the saying that prompted this long introduction: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which kills the prophets and stones those sent to you, how often have I wished to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not have it?’ With tears in His eyes, the Lord compared himself to a hen in its desire to shield its chicks from danger, especially the dangers that lead to hell. He had sent prophets, He had sent priests, and now He had come in person, to save His people from certain destruction, and instead of welcoming Him, they turned Him over to the Romans to have Him killed.

Jesus still desires to gather men under His wings as a hen does her chicks, but now He desires to do so not only for the Jews, but for all of mankind. Jerusalem was destroyed because it had forgotten the living God and rejected His Son; and this world, after having known Christ, has also rejected Him and made its own idols. Therefore, the Lord says to the world now: “How often have I wished to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not have it.”

We who are members of His Church and sharers in His Body and Blood, however—we do desire to hide under His wings. In commenting on this passage, St. Augustine explains how it is that the Lord is like a hen: when we observe other birds, we see them making nests and feeding their young, but we never see them becoming like them in order to protect them. A wren who’s young are threatened does not sit on top of them to keep them from a predator; rather, she attacks the predator from elsewhere, and angrily chatters at it. In contrast, when a hen’s chicks are threatened, she lifts her wings slightly so the chicks can come to her, and when they are gathered under her, she lowers her wings and her body and prepares to be attacked by the dog or the hawk that is coming for her chicks.

In the same way, when we were being assailed by the devil and attacked on all sides by his lies and hatred, the Son of God did not think it was enough to defend us only from heaven—He took on human flesh so that He could shield us by His humanity also. By becoming man, Jesus lifted His wings, as it were, and invited us to hide there until the enemy has passed on. And just as a mother hen will allow herself to be killed rather than offer up even one of her chicks to a predator, so the Lord died for us on the Cross so that the devil could not have us.

And though this mystery happened two thousand years ago, yet Christ continues to protect us from the devil. Were it not for the Church, which came forth from His side when He was asleep on the Cross, we would be left to the dogs right now. We would have been torn apart by the lies and manipulation and abuse that is characteristic of our society. Were it not for the priesthood, which is a continuation of His presence on earth, we would not be able to confess our sins and receive absolution, for the greatest way in which the devil takes hold of us is through our sins.

Perhaps the greatest example of Jesus continuing to be a mother hen is in the Eucharist. He becomes weak for us in that sacrament; He is entirely at our mercy, such that Jesus often allows Himself to be harmed, whether by a sacrilegious or unbelieving priest, or by men and women who receive Him despite the gravity of their unconfessed sins. Pope Benedict wrote well of this some years ago when he said, “How often is the holy sacrament of Jesus’ Presence abused, how often must he enter empty and evil hearts! How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him! How much pride, how much self-complacency! ... All this is present in Christ’s Passion. His betrayal by his disciples, their unworthy reception of his Body and Blood, is certainly the greatest suffering endured by the Redeemer; it pierces his heart.”

Clearly, then, Jesus makes Himself weak in the Eucharist, so weak that in His sacramental presence, He can be harmed. But the reason He becomes weak in the Eucharist is not to needlessly expose Himself to attack, but in order to feed us and by feeding us, to protect us. Though He is weak insofar as anyone could easily destroy or injure the host or spill the chalice, Jesus is also very strong in the Eucharist, for through His Body and Blood, He shields us from spiritual harm, He increases our virtue, He enlarges our hearts, He gives us strength to keep fighting the good fight. And it is only upon reaching heaven and looking back upon our lives that we will know

how many times we would have lost our faith had not Jesus fed us in the Eucharist. The hen lifts her wings for us: we need only hide under them, and that by receiving the Blessed Sacrament with faith and love, and as often as possible.

So, we should take to heart the serious admonitions contained in today's readings, but we should also consider the gifts of grace and faith we have been given: what great love of the Eucharist so many of you have, a desire to hide under Christ's wings! How many of you confess your sins often lest you defile the Blessed Sacrament? How many of you yearn for Him and receive Him with the love of Mary Magdalene or of John the Beloved? How many of you have raised your children such that their hearts are pure and their faith is strong so that Jesus may live in them? And how many of you would gladly die to protect the Blessed Sacrament from sacrilege or abuse? Yes we are sinners, but today we should imagine Jesus saying to us, "How often have I wished to gather you, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you have let me. You have run to me in time of trial, you have believed my words, you have trusted in my power, you have honored my Passion."

May these words be said of each of us, such that we hide with Christ until this life is over, and then live with Him forever, our Savior and our God, in the city that is above, in the New Jerusalem.