

## Sermon for Sunday 16 July 2023

**Genesis 25: 19 – end; Romans 8: 1 – 11; Matthew 13: 1 – 9, 18 – 23**

### The Parable of the Sower

Our Gospel reading today gives us perhaps one of the most familiar parables – the Parable of the Sower.

Most of us have probably sown seeds at some time in our lives. Whether we are now enthusiastic growers – with allotments as well as gardens, or whether we have reached a stage when we prefer just to watch things grow! There's something astounding about the way a tiny seed, given water, soil and sunshine, is utterly transformed as it grows into a plant. Jesus' hearers would have been very familiar with the idea of the farmer sowing the seed; and Jesus gives a vivid picture of what happens to the seeds, depending on where they happen to fall. Some are whisked away by the birds, some shoot up quickly but then die in the hot sun, some are

choked by weeds, and some flourish and produce a huge harvest.

Jesus' parables are not intended to give us easy answers, but they are intended to be memorable, and to provoke us to ponder, and to ask questions. Today I'd like to think about two questions arising from this parable. One – What is good soil like? Two. Who is the sower?

What is good soil like?

Well, definitely not like my front garden, which is mostly sand! Good gardeners, I believe, pay constant attention to the quality of the soil. Tilling, mulching, removing stones and whatever else is necessary.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that the word of God, or the message of Jesus, is the seed, and the hearts of the hearers are the soil.

The parable tells us several things about what good soil is not like. First of all, it is not trodden hard, like the soil on the path which won't let the seed in. In Psalm 95, which used to be said at Mattins, we hear these words: "O that today you

would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts.....” Those words reverberated through my childhood as I sat in church on Sundays, and they really struck me. They still remind me of the need to have a receptive heart. We need to be willing not just to hear, but to really listen to what God has to say and prepared to be challenged and changed by it. Then the seed has a chance to take root.

Psalms 119 (which is by far the longest Psalm), is all about hearing and acting on God’s commands. The psalmist says “Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.” Here the word “understanding” means not just an intellectual grasp of God’s law, but a moral commitment at the deepest level. The Psalmist prays to God for this deep kind of understanding which will keep him wholeheartedly obedient to God. Good soil is deep soil, where the roots of God’s message can also go down deep becoming so much a part of us that nothing can dislodge them or displace them. No matter what the difficulties or the distractions this kind of soil continues to nurture

the seed because it is so firmly embedded. This kind of soil finally it produces an abundant harvest.

We can’t take these analogies too far. But we can all pay attention to the state of our spiritual soil. What will nurture our souls? What will help us to be more focussed on God, more receptive to Him and less distracted? We may know the answers deep down, but still find it difficult to put into practice.

For some of us it may even help to imagine our spiritual life as a garden. What does it look like? A bit of a jungle, or all dried up like a desert? What is flourishing? Where do we need to prune or tidy? Are there things we need to get rid of? Is there something we need to plant more of?

It is God who gives life and growth, but we can all pay attention to the soil, doing what we can to make the best conditions for the seed.

Moving on to my second question. Who is the sower?

At one level, it's obvious. God, or Jesus is the sower, sowing the message of the Kingdom. The parable is a picture of God's action in the world through Jesus. The parable also explains why when so many people hear Jesus' words so few respond by becoming his followers and why many seem interested for while, but fall away. The seed is plentifully sown, but the soil conditions, our human hearts, are against much of it.

The expected yield from a sowing of wheat at the time of Jesus would have been somewhere between fivefold and fifteenfold. So a hundredfold, sixtyfold or thirtyfold is certainly miraculous and shows the extraordinary power of God in bringing in his kingdom. Though many reject the message there will, in the end, be a stupendous harvest. We might think of the millions of Christians down the ages and across the globe in our own time.

Jesus' explanation of the parable is only given to the disciples, not to the great crowd who first hear the story. One reason for this may be that

the disciples, in their turn are invited to be 'sowers of the word'. God alone gives the growth, but they will be sent out to – metaphorically speaking - prepare the soil, scare away the birds, uproot the thorns and make it possible for the seed to grow. This is hard labour, and requires patience and perseverance. They need to know that it isn't going to be easy, not many will respond, but it will be worth it for the abundant harvest that God is going to bring in the end.

So, as we think about this parable, let's consider the state of our own hearts. Are we ready to hear what God is saying to us, to allow it to take root within us and produce a harvest?

And are we ready to be sowers ourselves, to help those seeds to take root in the hearts and lives of others?

Amen

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