

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

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The Parable of the Sower is one of Jesus's best-known teachings. Phrases from it have passed into the language – fragments like 'fell by the wayside' or 'on stony ground' are still in daily use without most people realising their source. As Jesus moved through Galilee, teaching by the lakeside and in the villages, he often used parables or analogies beginning 'the Kingdom of Heaven is like...', taking examples from the world around him, many of them drawn from agriculture. Today's is the first of three stories in a row in Matthew's Gospel that are about seeds. Next week we will hear the story of the wheat and the weeds, and the following week the one about the mustard seed.

Unlike most of Jesus's parables, the parable of the sower is followed by an interpretation given to his disciples. Most commentators feel that this interpretation belongs to early Christian tradition rather than to Jesus himself, who used parables precisely because they are open-ended, capable of carrying more than one meaning. He encouraged his hearers to reflect on them, discerning different layers of significance in them as they went about their daily lives.

As a way of teaching, parables invite us to deepen our thinking. They speak sideways, or parabolically, about their subject matter. They raise questions that

invite theological enquiry. Is God the sower, or is Jesus? Or the Spirit? Or perhaps anyone who speaks the word? How is a divine sower like or unlike a human sower? Are other functions (watering, tending, weeding and harvesting) also necessary in the analogy? What exactly is the seed?

Some have seen echoes in this parable of Isaiah's prophecy, which we heard in our Old Testament reading today, that God's word will not return to heaven empty but will accomplish his purpose and 'succeed in the thing for which [God] sent it'. (Isaiah 55.11). If we place that notion alongside the Prologue to John's Gospel, which writes of Jesus as the Word, we might see in the different types of soil different parts of the Gospel accounts of the story of Jesus.

By reflecting on Jesus's parables, we enter more deeply into the mystery of the divine. I used to attend a church whose mission statement included the words: 'We do not seek to provide easy answers, but to uphold one another in living with the questions.' Human understanding lacks the full capacity to know God, but we see glimpses of the divine in a world shot through with beauty and a sense of the transcendent. And Christian belief is that the closest insight into the nature of God that we will ever encounter in this world is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus speaks in parables because theological language can only ever be an approximation, pointing towards the mystery that is God. They are like impressionist art, made up of colour and light rather than straight lines. Jesus plants parables in the imaginations of his hearers to do the work that Scripture and theological language are supposed to do: to take root, mature and bear

fruit. He does not promise results, for how they are received depends also on the recipient.

I will admit that, when I was younger, I used to find the explanation of the parable about the different types of soil rather depressing. Three out of the four types on which the seeds fall are incapable of bringing life, and when I heard the reasons listed, I reckoned I had already failed on the first or second soil types before we had even got to the third (on which I would definitely have failed). This meant that the fourth – where the growth finally happened – was simply beyond reach. Even the worst type of school exam didn't come with a 75% failure rate. How on earth was one to live the Christian life?

But one of the benefits of age is that it brings perspective, and I have gradually come to see that, as receivers of Jesus's message, we are in reality all four of the types of soil all of the time. The important thing is to be as fruitful as we can be, accepting that the amount we produce will not be the same all the time. The question the parable asks of us is: how are we to bear fruit, whatever the challenges we face?

Looking back at the weeks of lockdown, a lot of the time our imaginations have felt stony, the sense of being among thorns has predominated, and brief moments of joy have been followed by a slump in optimism as the troubled times got the better of us. (Perhaps that's just me, and you have had a different experience!) But there *have* been times, too, when it has felt like a fertile process, when we gained insights which we wouldn't have had in 'normal' times, when we felt a deepening of our faith and of our trust in God.

Let us pause for a moment from worrying about which soil type we are, and consider instead the seed. A seed contains forces of life and transformation. It encapsulates potential; its future is open. It unfolds relationally, for it depends not only upon its own potential but upon the potential within the soil, and how they interact. It is like a parable.

In the parable, seed is cast wherever growth might be found. I wonder if we do that enough in our attempts to live out the values of the Kingdom? Or are we too cautious, like the one who buried their talent in the ground, afraid of failure? If we keep on speaking the Gospel, keep on showing compassion, keep on crossing the road to help those whom the world has ignored or marginalised, we may lose our life - or we may find it. Elsewhere, in John's Gospel, Jesus teaches us that 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' One thing the parable of the sower teaches us is that, in seeking to build up the Kingdom, we must be prepared to fail. It also reminds us there is reason for hope, as the harvest of the risen Christ knows no limits: thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

That, in the end, is the message. We are capable of being the fourth type of soil, and we mustn't beat ourselves up on the days when we feel like the other three. We must pick ourselves up, trust in God's abundance, his forgiveness and his overwhelming love, and see what a new day brings. For he wants us to bear fruit. And on those days when we don't feel we are bearing any fruit, or if we are still depressed about our soil type, we could do worse than remember that other agricultural parable of Jesus: the one about the fig tree. When the owner of the fig tree came looking for fruit on it and found none, he said to the gardener: 'Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' But the gardener

replied: 'Let it alone, until I dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit, well and good.' (Luke 13.7-9)

That's a gardener of infinite patience. A gardener of infinite mercy. And we know who he is - for Mary Magdalene met him, on the morning of resurrection.

Amen.