

Sermon 12th July 2020 – Year A - Trinity 5 – Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-23

The Parable of the Sower

These have been such difficult times for so many of us, with huge changes to our lives caused by COVID-19 and the lockdown. For some of us, we've experienced real anxiety about our own situations and health, for some of us we have experienced the tragedy of family or friends becoming ill with the virus, for some of us we have even experienced the death of someone close to us.

So it might seem strange, even insensitive of me, to focus my reflection this morning on something that seems so different to our recent experiences, but the lectionary readings this morning can only lead us towards looking at this something and considering our right response to it.

It's a something we can often take for granted, something that's with us all the time, whatever difficulties we might be experiencing, that's beyond any value or price, and that we've done nothing to deserve – God's abundant, you could say outrageous, blessings. In the passage from Isaiah read by Chelsea we hear God's promise that his word to us is like the rain and snow that water the earth to produce crops, that his word will not come back to him empty. There's also a promise here that we will be lead forth to a place of joy and abundance, that even the trees of the field will clap their hands at what the Lord has done, that new, good life will spring up, not weeds like thorns and briars.

And in the passage from St Paul's letter to the Romans read by Helen we hear more about this new life, the life in the Spirit that's open to all of us through Jesus's life, death and resurrection, the life and peace that we gain through Jesus when we set our minds on the things of the Spirit and live according to the Spirit.

The Sower

To continue this idea of new and abundant life I'd like to focus today on the Gospel reading from Matthew 13, often known as the parable of the sower. It's not about *a* sower, it's about *the* sower, Jesus. And, as we've heard, there are four soils, each of them yielding a different result as the seed of the Word is sown on them. Notice that the seed is the word of the Kingdom of God and the soil, as Jesus says in verse 19, is the human heart. So this is a parable that speaks to the human heart, to your heart and mine. But before we look at this more closely, let's think a bit about the sower, Jesus.

On the face of it, it looks like this particular sower doesn't really know what he's doing. You might guess that someone with the label 'sower' would understand the way that sowing seed works, that in order to get the seed to grow you need to make sure that you sow it into good soil. But this sower doesn't do that. He scatters his seed, it seems, pretty much everywhere,

even in places where there's little chance of growth. In our human understanding this seems a waste, until we remember who the sower really is, until we remember that it's Jesus the sower. And then we remember that this is a God of abundance, the same God that, as we hear in Isaiah 55, lavishly and abundantly waters the earth with rain and snow to bring forth the cypress tree and the myrtle, who leads us out with joy, in whose presence the mountains and the hills break forth in singing. We can be confident in this God, who blesses us so abundantly, so outrageously that he gave us his only Son to, as it says in Paul's letter to the Romans, set us free from the law of sin and death, that in him there is now no condemnation, nor ever will be.

The Soil

So that's how the sower works, but what about the soil? In some ways this parable could be called the parable of the soil, not the parable of the sower, because the soil, as we've seen, is the human heart, your heart and mine, and that's where the whole point of the parable lies. As we hear, there may be four types of soil, but only one of them produces fruit. So what does Jesus say about these different soils?

The first soil is mentioned in verse 19, it's the seed sown on the path. This is the picture of the *impervious heart*; a heart impervious to the Gospel. The seed doesn't penetrate at all, Satan comes like a bird and snatches the word away.

Jesus deals with the second soil in verses 20 and 21. It's the seed sown where the rock rises closest to the surface; it's the rocky soil. This is a picture now of the *superficial heart*. It's a picture of a person who is genuinely intrigued by the good news about Jesus, who receives the word with joy, but affliction or trouble or persecution come on account of the word, and they fall away and stop believing.

The third soil is the *stifled* heart. Here a person hears the word, the seed begins to grow but the cares of the world and the lies of riches choke the word and prevent it from growing and bearing fruit.

The fourth and final soil is the good soil, it's the *receptive* heart, the changed heart. It's the soil that receives the word, grasps and comprehends it, allows the seed to grow and bears much fruit, thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. It's the only soil of the four that bears any fruit. And what sort of fruit is it? As we hear in Galatians 5, it's the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is the fruit we bear when we hear God's word with changed and receptive hearts.

Changing our hearts

So we, you and I, we need to respond to this passage, to ask ourselves how we can change our hearts so that they become more receptive to God's word and bear much good fruit. First, I believe we need to repent and turn away from those things that are blocking the word of God from entering our hearts and growing there. In the passage from Isaiah, when God says you shall go out with joy, he's talking about the Hebrew people being led back to their homeland from an exile they brought upon themselves by their sin and disobedience to God,

but he's also looking to all his people, including you and me, who will be led forth by the redemption of Christ from the power of sin and death. And, as it says in Romans 8, we need to set our minds on and live according to the things of the Spirit; if we continue to live in the flesh we cannot please God.

So, what sort of soil are we? What sort of soil are you? What sort of soil am I? Here are some questions for us all to consider:

- ***What kind of soil is my heart?***
- ***Have I become hardened to the things of God?***
- ***Am I shallow in my commitment to Him and His work?***
- ***Am I constantly distracted, burdened and defeated by sin and the cares of the world?***
- ***Am I bearing the kind of fruit I should be bearing (the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control)?***

Perhaps we could all spend some time with God this week examining our hearts. Let's get our Bibles out and read the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 again, asking God to be with us, to show us by his grace what kind of soil we are, the areas we need to repent of and with God's help turn away from, and ask him, again by his grace, to help us bear fruit for his Kingdom, thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.

Amen.