

A sower went to sow...

Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

It is one of the most visual of Jesus' parables. It's easy to imagine the sower going out to sow. Pictures in so many Sunday School books and stained glass windows. The images are vivid. The sower, seed-satchel strapped over his shoulder, striding out over the field, perhaps in the dawn of a new day, broadcast sowing from left to right, going up and down until the field is covered. Pathways, birds in his wake, thistles and thorns at the edges of the field, and God's own good earth, tilled, beneath his feet.

The story can be understood in many different ways, and applied to our lives accordingly. It can speak to a nation, it can speak to a Church, it can speak to an individual. That's what parables do: they are multi-layered and as we look through their prism we find something of God's all-seeing eye looking back at us. Maybe another way would be to think of the parable as a mirror. When it is held up, what do we see reflected back? Encouraging? Unsettling? Hopeful? Challenging? At the very least enough to make us pause and think and wonder, and that's not bad thing in itself.

In this parable then, some things to wonder about and reflect upon:

- Who is the sower, and what is the seed that is sown so indiscriminately and hopefully?

Is the sower God, or Jesus? Do we imagine them walking up and down the land, sowing the good news of love, mercy, hope wherever they go? One of the important things to remember is that this work of sowing never stops. Year in, year out, generation after generation. If it is the work of God, or Jesus, it is also the work of their followers, found inside and outside the Church.

In the last weeks I have spoken to so many people over the phone, who miss what we do as a Church. They've told me stories about the kindness and the welcome and the fun they've had; they've told me stories about the sad times and the people they miss. In the last few weeks, when I've been down checking the building out, it has been good to talk to people who live around the church, many of whom have been thankful for the grounds around the building. A father playing

with his child; two friends living in different flats able to sit on camp stools and share a cup of coffee together, two metres apart. A couple celebrating an anniversary, enjoying a glass of champagne on our front steps. I've not missed the opportunity to say to them – "Come back when we're open, you'll be very welcome." They've never failed to say that having that open space on their doorstep has been a godsend. Of course it is! And who knows what might happen when our doors eventually open again. A building that has been taken for granted in the midst of the community, with its seeds of good news spread across our parish, maybe ready again for harvest. Never underestimate the good work that we have been doing for years, and the impact for good we have. In the parable we might wonder at the profligacy of the sower's method. What sort of worldview is suggested by someone who throws seeds on a well-worn path where birds can eat them, or on rocky ground where it is unlikely that they will grow, or among thorns that will choke them?¹ We would recommend a business plan, careful stewardship of precious resources, and so on. Maybe the sower here does what he does in order to remind us that the gospel might be bigger than just good soil. If the sower is God, maybe God throws the seed just anywhere, because, 'just anywhere' is the area of God's care and saving work. God's vision of the world is that sometimes it is in the rocky, barren, broken places where God's good news needs to be heard. We don't need to take the parable literalistically throughout. The parable may be about good soil, as we shall see, but it is also about a good sower, Whose love and care and generosity to us is meant to inspire. We show what kindness and welcome we can. We sow the seed, others water, and God will give the growth.

- Jesus' parable isn't only about the seed sown, but also the soil it falls into. What are you: path; rocky ground; thorny ground; good soil?

Another way of looking at this parable is to look at the soil into which the seed falls. Again, it translates to our country, our community, our church, ourselves. Is our country ready to respond to God's good news; or our community; or the Church; or we, ourselves? In every situation, in every life, there are hard paths; there is rocky soil; there are weeds; and there is good soil. Over these weeks of lockdown I have been brought again and again to reflect on my life, my faith, my

fruitfulness for the gospel. The pulpit is as much prone to be a hard path, rocky soil, weed-choked, and good soil as any other part of the Church, or the community, or the country.

As a Church, and certainly me as a Minister, there are times when we spend a lot of resources – time, energy, hope – trying to coax, cajole, and beg for growth from inhospitable places and people. We can spend much time despairing when the seed does not take root.ⁱⁱ The sower in the parable does not do that. He accepts the reality that some seed just won't take. But he keeps on sowing. Jesus accepted in His ministry that sometimes the seed just won't take, but He kept on sowing His message of repentance, mercy and unshakeable love, nevertheless. We, His followers, are called to do the same. In the darkest moments of the lockdown I hoped and prayed that maybe now, maybe this time, the wonderful message that our Church, and all churches, have shared would at last take root. Our kindness and service and compassion and willingness to help would turn the nation, the community back to places like this, and believe, and follow, and join, and participate. As lockdown eases, I wonder. But then again, I need to remember, we need to remember, we are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful. We sow the seed, others water, and God will give the growth.

- What will be the harvest?

The parable does not end with inhospitable soils, and frustration, and failure. It does not even end with a normal harvest from the good soil. It ends with a miracle, a hundredfold harvest. It is for us to trust, and for me to preach, that possibility of miracle too. We are challenged not simply to 'keep on keeping on', in the face of restriction, or reduction, or rejection. We are challenged to believe in God's abundance, and God's generosity. Faith isn't always pragmatic; it is also promise. Do you really believe that? Do I really believe that? Or are we so busy doing and making and organising and planning that we leave God, and the hope of God, so little room to work in?

This is not a call to sit back and do nothing. But it is a reminder that we work with God, keeping sowing, in the hope of Harvest. An American novelist wrote: "Some of us have that empty-barrel faith. Walking around expecting things to run out. Expecting that there isn't enough air, enough

water. Expecting that someone is going to do you wrong. The God I serve told me to expect the best, that there is enough for everybody.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That is the God this parable calls us to trust. Jesus knows the hard ways of this world. He also knows the abundant ways of God. I read this parable again, and I am reminded that God intends for me, and for you, to keep hopeful and humble. We have to get things started. It is God Who will take over from there. We sow the seed, others water, and God will give the growth.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Theodore J Wardlaw, *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, vol 3, p237

ⁱⁱ Talitha J Arnold, *ibid*, p238

ⁱⁱⁱ Bebe Moore Campbell, *Singing in the Comeback Choir*, p131