

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 6 AT STAPLEFORD: 16 JULY 2023**

**(based on Matt.13:1-9&18-23, with brief ref. to Isa. 55:10-13 & Romans 8:1-11)**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

### **Carelessness or generosity?**

Isaiah starts us off this week in joyous praise of the Lord, who provides all that is needed for both our physical and spiritual well-being. He likens his word to the seed of the sower, bringing forth a harvest. And we become the sowers who will go out in joy and come back in peace, spreading the seed that is the word of God. That passage makes a perfect introduction to the the gospel reading from Matthew.

On the face of it, Matthew has made this week's sermon sooo easy. Jesus' very familiar parable of the sower is delivered with an interpretation - the allegory is explained - job done! Or is it? Are all our questions answered? Might we not be tempted to probe a little? And before you say "life's too short and Sunday lunch awaits", let me try to persuade you that there is still more to be gained from this parable.

It's a parable about people's mixed responses to the ministry and teaching of Jesus. It comes at a point in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is encountering hostility - he has even been rejected by his home town. For that reason, it makes sense for Jesus' explanation to focus on the different types of response to his ministry, represented by the variety of soils in the parable. There are many who "hear the word of the kingdom and do not understand", including the religious leaders; and there are the crowds of apparent supporters who respond well to his miracles, yet many of whom turn against him in the end, to the point of demanding his crucifixion. Even the disciples, who did not have a very good track record, can be included among those who fall away "when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word". Then there are those who care more about material wealth, who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing". So, three out of four types of soil, or people, fail to measure up.

That leaves us with a couple of questions: who qualifies as good soil? If so much ground is unproductive, is there no hope at all for rocky, hardened and thorny soils? Should such ground be avoided? By implication, the disciples, and we as present day followers of Christ, are effectively to preach to the converted and those willing to lend their ears to listen. In view of Jesus' targeting during his ministry of the harder to reach, such as tax collectors and prostitutes, that strikes me as unlikely and somewhat devoid of hope.

Have I opened a can of worms with those questions? - well at least they'll be good for the soil! - or might we find the answers with a little more digging? - excuse the puns! Since we call this 'the parable of the sower', let's turn to the main character - the sower himself, whom we take to be Jesus, but who could equally be God, since he is the source of Christ's teachings. For those hearing this at the time, the sower may appear either extremely reckless with the seed, or simply extravagant. Seed was sown by hand in those days and inevitably some would go where it was not intended. But for three quarters of it to land where it shouldn't, that's plain careless, isn't it? Or perhaps the point here is not carelessness but generosity. Taking the seed to be the word of God, is the sower here wastefully extravagant? or simply generous, spreading the word widely, regardless of potentially unfavourable conditions? If we are to share Jesus' teachings generously, we shouldn't prejudge which people and places are worthy of them and which are not.

As for what happens to that seed, we hope that it will yield a harvest, grain from which we extract flour to make bread etc. In other words, it produces food to nourish and sustain us, along with more seeds for future yields. Nourishment and hope - the harvest offered to all through the word of God. In Matthew, Jesus talks about the variety of yield that the seed produces on good soil: "Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some [just - my insertion] thirty". Even sown in good soil, some yields will be greater than others. Matthew is writing for a first century mixed community of Jews and Gentiles - he knows that not all receivers of the word will respond in the same way.

And that life-cycle of the seed grain brings us back to the soil, to us the listeners. Everyone has the potential to be good soil. But if we are honest,

we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives on any given day. The hope generated in this parable is in the fact that the sower keeps sowing abundantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus did not give up on his disciples, even when they repeatedly failed to understand, even in his hour of need. We trust that he will not give up on us either, but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky or thorny within us. And we are reminded of that in the reading from Romans, which reassures us that we are not working with God's word unaided. The Spirit dwells in us, life-giving and keeping us strong as we do God's sowing and reaping.

This parable raises some thorny issues, and much to ponder. If words are seed, we know for example that not every seed flourishes in fertile soil; that even what we call weeds are good for biodiversity. So, if following Jesus' example includes becoming sowers, then perhaps we need to scatter the word generously beyond those places where it is already well received. Growth, like understanding, needs time and perseverance. We shouldn't be afraid to explore new terrain, rejoicing in even the smallest yield - for it, too, will ultimately produce its own seed.

In the name of Christ, amen.