

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 12th July 2020
5th Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Almighty God,
send down upon your Church
the riches of your Spirit,
and kindle in all who minister the gospel
your countless gifts of grace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

'Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke

the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'

Sermon

There should perhaps be a book entitled “sermons I have heard on the Parable of the Sower.” I expect most of us could recount a few. And perhaps also some that have had a particular impact. We know Jesus’s preference for speaking in parables, for telling stories and inviting his listeners to enter into them in order to discover something about themselves, and most importantly about God. We also know that some of the parables are complicated. We struggle to make sense of them. Jesus himself recognised that sometimes the messages would be hard to hear – he says so in today’s reading: “Let anyone with ears listen!”

Perhaps the enduring popularity of the Parable of the Sower is that it is one of the few parables for which we have an explanation – and according to the text, the explanation comes from Jesus himself. How many times, I wonder, have you read a parable in the gospels and longed for Jesus to explain it to you in the way we hear the parable of the sower explained here. Immediately we are told that the parable is about hearing and understanding God’s word. The seed is the word; we are the soil (or at least where the seed lands), and what happens to God’s word depends on how we receive it. I wonder, how thankful are you for that clarity? Does it leave you wanting a similar explanation of other parables?

And yet I don’t think that’s the only attraction of this particular parable. The thing is, it is something that we really can relate to. I am no gardener, still less a planter of seeds, but I can understand the image of seeds sown in different environments. More than that, though, each time I read or hear this parable, I find myself hearing something different within it. We might find it familiar. We might think we have heard all there is to hear on the matter. But my experience is that, as I sit with the various images of seed sown in different environments, I always discover something different. And of course that is why Jesus spoke in parables. Two thousand years later they are as alive as ever, encouraging us to listen again and again in order to hear what God may have to say to us today through this particular story.

And so this year we hear this parable in a context that is quite new to us all. We have just spent three months in lockdown. That time extended across our season of Spring and into Summer, and I expect that many of us have taken time to notice the spring and summer plants more this year than before.

As well as that, it is several months since we last experienced worship in that familiar way of coming to church on a Sunday morning; gathering with others; hearing God’s word; receiving the sacrament; and sharing fellowship after the service. Since this parable is about hearing, understanding and receiving God’s word, it is likely that we bring a different perspective this year than we ever have before.

If, in the analogy of this parable, we are the soil or ground on which God’s word falls, I tend to think that we are not necessarily consistently one kind of ground. If you’re anything like me, you may be able to recognise different times in your life when you can identify with different kinds of ground or soil. Those occasions when you have simply not wanted to hear anything from or about God – where the seed of God’s word has been snatched away because you didn’t want to receive it. Other times when you have had other distractions. Bringing up a family, perhaps, or busyness at work. Or friends who have had no interest in faith, meaning that you might have felt the need to choose between friends and God. You may recognise times when you have felt hungry for God; inspired perhaps by something immediate – a service that really seemed to connect; a retreat or religious festival – yet you didn’t pursue it any further, so that initial fervour didn’t really come to anything. And hopefully you will also be able to look back on times when you have found a pattern of worship, prayer and fellowship that has really nourished your faith. Time to learn and discover more, which has made you that rich soil of which the parable speaks.

Given the unusual circumstances of the past months, I wonder what it is that you have discovered about your faith during this time. What kind of soil would you say you have been throughout lockdown? Perhaps it has changed significantly over that time. What did you find you missed from regular worship? And what have you found nourishing and fruitful that you might not have expected? Some of you may have discovered your inner contemplative. And others may have realised that you have connected with God through keeping a journal. Perhaps music is something you have realised really helps you in drawing close to God. And you may have found out something about the significance of other people in your own faith journey.

Something that I have been reminded of especially this year as I have re-read this familiar parable is to focus on the sower. I have heard Bishop Andrew discuss this parable in our present context, exploring the significance of the word “broadcast.” The word comes from the concept of sowing seeds by scattering. Those of you who are gardeners will probably have your faithful dibbers to make sure that the seed is planted carefully to give it the best chance of growing. Whereas the sower in the parable broadcasts the seed – he scatters it far and wide.

And in this current time, when church has had to find new ways of operating, we are broadcasting in that other meaning of the word, using variously Facebook, YouTube, Zoom and of course television and radio to share God’s word.

While this parable undoubtedly encourages us to look at ourselves and consider the kind of soil we are as we hear and share God’s word, we mustn’t forget to look the other way too and gaze on the sower. And as we do so, we are reminded that God’s word is not shared meanly or thinly, but rather is scattered widely and generously. We remember, too, that God does not wait for us to be good soil, but rather keeps on scattering, believing in the possibility of that word being heard, received and understood.

Because I am not a gardener, I am very familiar with brambles. And as I have been reading the Parable of the Sower, I have been playing with the extent to which the seed of God’s word is a bit like brambles. I have no idea how it is that brambles keep on appearing and indeed keep on growing – far faster and stronger than almost anything else in my garden. The thorns can be off-putting – but then there is surely a challenge in hearing and receiving God’s word. We will be changed by it. And yet if we wait for the delicate flowers, we see the beauty, and the promise of the wonderful fruit as well.

The only thing that can really stop brambles is being consistently uprooted. Of course I need to end the analogy there, because there is nothing wrong with uprooting brambles in your garden to allow other plants to flourish. But when it comes to God’s word, the greatest risk is not just rejecting it, but actively opposing it, over and over and over. God’s word is lavishly and generously shared with us. God knows that sometimes we are willing and ready to receive; other times we are a bit distracted; and still others we don’t quite have the commitment to give God’s word a chance. Yet God continues to sow. And our thankfulness is part of our way of welcoming God into our lives.

Amen.