

A sower went out to sow

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

"Listen!" says Jesus. "A sower went out to sow." Parables are provocations. They are the opposite of the open and shut cases in which we get 'told' the answers, neatly packaged. They raise questions, they invite us to think and use our imagination. We are summoned to explore. If ever there was evidence in the Bible that we were not to take every single word as literally true, here are the parables of Jesus. There is no such thing as the 'simple truth' of the Bible. It's complex, multi-layered, dependent on context, challenging us to engage with what the meaning meant in Jesus' time, and what it might mean today.

That's frustrating, when we so often want black and white, straight answers that are easy to comprehend.

God touches our minds, our imagination, our feelings, and our hearts. The sower going out to sow is not a farming manual. It's not Monty Don and Gardener's World. It's not the homespun Doric gardening insights of Beechgrove. In the parable, the story with a deeper meaning, about the sower, Jesus is talking about something more complex. Something more challenging.

Here's a story, Jesus says. Let it work in you, work on you. Think on it, brood over it, talk about it. Maybe the story itself will be like the good seed in the sower story, giving a return out of all proportion to its size.ⁱ

There are at least three ways to look at this story. This is not only the parable of the sower; it is also the parable of the four soils, and the parable of the miraculous harvest. We have a story about the extravagant evangelism of God; the importance of understanding, persevering and being attentive to the miracle of faith.

We see a little of this also in the hopeful words of Isaiah, written to a people who felt in exile that the world had become dead to them. Not so, said God. His word of hope had been sown like a seed, and however long it might take, it would bear fruit. God's word of hope goes out, it is planted in the world, in the lives of people and, "it shall not return to Me empty." In a world where we too often look for quick fixes and instant returns, we forget the long, slow arc of God's hopeful action that brackets history, and we are called to work on steadily, diligently, patiently, not looking too far ahead, but confident that what we are doing, as best we are able, is the right thing for this time.

That applies to life, our personal lives and public life. It applies to the challenges facing our economy, and to the quagmire of so much of national and international politics. It applies to the cesspool of tabloid journalism, more interested in harm and destruction, than justice. It applies to the Church, in these times of change and uncertainty, where we need, yet again, to evaluate what we do, why we do it, and how we are going to plant and replant the harvest of hope in our community as we create and recreate places of welcome and inclusion, for those who find the faith family easy, and those who find it difficult.

An American theologian has written that the parable of the sower is, "crucial for the church to imagine the kind of community that we must be in order to survive in a world that assumes that biological kinship is more determinative than our kinship in Christ."ⁱⁱ A community where we say the words and do the actions and open the doors and make space for people who want to come to the heart of things, or are happier on the fringes, but all of them have within them that one seed of faith, or hope, or love, that somehow God has planted within them and it has begun to grow.

Like the sower, Jesus has gone out of the house and down to the shore. He had taught on the mountain, now He teaches on the water, floating on a boat a few yards offshore. He is audible to the people on the beach, but just out of their grasp and touch. I wonder if that might also be a picture of the way parables work too – easy to hear, but a little harder to get a hold of.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Jesus' story, who is the sower? Who is the one who throws about with hopeful purpose and prodigal abandon the seeds which have cost him dear and on which his future depends...throws these tiny, miniscule, seeming dead husks with the hope for harvest...throws to left and right, here and there, knowing some of the ground is too hard, some of the ground is too rocky, in some of the ground there lurks already the other seed of thorns and thistle...but who knows too that there is good soil there, soil which will yield and increase and give a harvest.^{iv}

The parable has three actions: sowing, growing and listening.

The sower appears to have no great plan for sowing – he is unfocused, generous. Thorny patch, rocky ground, rich topsoil. But note it's the same seed that is sown everywhere. God's message, God's expectation, is the same. The difference is in the soil, in the people who accept, or reject, what God offers. There's a hard truth here. Not all of our efforts will bear fruit. Some seed is lost. Some will bear fruit. But we keep on sowing. In the parable only one in four seeds brings harvest. Might it be the same for the work of the Church. I believe the encouragement is to throw out lots of seed and see what happens. "A church not failing at anything is perhaps one not risking enough."^v

The American naturalist Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."^{vi} Perhaps this is a good time for us to remember that we too are called to sow with wild abandon and to expect wonders where we work. What wonders are you expecting?

Growing is part of this parable. There is an act of faith in the planting of flowers, vegetables, trees. Sowing seed is an act of faith. It takes care, and nurture, and protection. In this Jesus story there is a similar process, though His version is more realistic. Every seed is sown in hope. Yet even though the seeds were equal and able to grow into plants and bear fruit, the surroundings in which they were nurtured made all the difference. Jesus knew what all farmers and gardeners know: good environments yield healthy plants; bad environments yield little or nothing. Here is a lesson of faith and reality that we should notice. Poor environments, thin soil, an abundance of weeds, or other challenges, lead to a poor result in growth. Seeds end up dormant or dead. Good soil is needed, and that is what we, in the Church, are called to provide. All those events, week in, week out – serving coffee, collecting people on the car rota, Morningside Hope and Heart for Art, singing in the choir, clean and bright accommodation, arranging the flowers, the monthly baking stall, a warm welcome at the door on Sunday, an afternoon tea, a fund-raising event, even a few Sundays back when you all helped with uncoupling the chairs to get ready for the primary school service – all of that is the good soil, the good environment, where seeds of faith grow. The inclusion, and the purpose, and the warmth. It helps growth, and that is what Jesus looks for in His Church.

Listening is part of this story from Jesus. "He who has ears, let him hear." Not only to take on what Jesus is saying, more than hearing; but understanding what Jesus says, and doing something to meet Jesus' expectation. In our busy, 24/7, social-media dominated world we are too often distracted, unaware, or even resistant to what Jesus says. To live without listening is an absurd way of life. And a dangerous one. What today, from this story of the sower going to sow, of the different soils, of the seeds of hope, of the harvest that may, or may not come, is Jesus saying to you now about your life, or the life of our country, or the life of our church? Beyond the keep on

keeping on, Jesus is saying something more. He is saying: believe in God's abundance. Believe in God's hope.

When it comes to faith, how many of us have an empty barrel faith? We go about expecting things to run out; expect that there isn't enough goodness or trust; expect that someone is going to do us wrong; expecting that no good will come of anything and that it is all pointless. The God I believe in and serve told me to expect the best, and that there is enough for everybody. I don't always live up to it, but by God I try. By God we should try!

In life, in the world, in the Church, there is nothing more attractive than hopefulness. Hopefulness that enables us to keep working and doing, keep on believing and trying. Keep on sowing. Yes there are hard ways in the world, Jesus knows. But He also knows of the abundant ways of God.

"I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."^{vii} Perhaps this is a good time for us to remember that we too are called to sow with wild abandon and to expect wonders where we work. What wonders are you expecting? What harvest will you, will be, grow for God? Keep on sowing.

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

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, *But I say to You*, p171

ⁱⁱ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p126

ⁱⁱⁱ John Proctor, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 1*, p351

^{iv} Fisher, p171

^v Mark R Burnham, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 1*, p352

^{vi} Henry David Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed*, vii

^{vii} Henry David Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed*, vii