

Sermon on 12th July 2020

Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23

Let's pray: Lord, in your mercy, open our hearts and minds to your words. Amen!

Let anyone with ears listen! Good Lord, aren't we doing that every day or at least every Sunday? Is this not enough? No, it isn't, because what Jesus really means is: Do you actually understand what I am saying? Sometimes, it looks easy.

Even if we are not so familiar these days with Jesus' imagery, we can imagine the scene. It looks like a pastoral idyll: a healthy looking man striding out over a field, scattering the seeds with a wide sweeping movement of his hand, trying to spread it as evenly as possible, the skylarks joyfully singing high up in the air.... In one sense, a true image, since in those days humans lived much closer to nature; in another sense, a brutal reality, since sheer survival depended on this activity. This is so typical for Jesus' parables: on the surface they look like nice stories, but actually, they have a very sharp edge to them.

So, let's go a bit deeper, and luckily, we do not have to toil over weighty theology tomes to understand the parable, since Jesus himself explains it! We all heard it in our reading, so how could I do it any better? I cannot, and this is exactly one of the points Jesus is making: each and every one of us has to think it through for her- or himself, there is no way around it. Jesus explains this clearly in the passage that is omitted from today's reading, where he explains why he uses parables – why not tell people the plain truth? Because they would not be able to understand. As so often, the human condition is in the way: if someone is saying challenging things to us, or criticising us, we try to deflect it to protect ourselves.

Jesus gets around this initial human response by telling a story, and only when one starts wondering about it, does the story have a chance to get the underlying meaning across. And the amazing bit is: this is a timeless strategy, which has worked well in the past, and is still as potent today as it ever was. Let's think it through:

Clearly, the Sower stands for Jesus, the seeds for his words, and the soil for humanity. Actually, the parable could be called the parable of the soil, since the focus is on the hearers. Jesus discerns four types of listeners:

First, those with shut minds. Jesus' words are to them like seed on an impenetrable hard ground. Why is this hardness in their minds? Maybe because of prejudices, or maybe to deny uncomfortable truths?

Second, those with shallow minds. These folks indulge in every new craze, and are quickly enthused, but as things become more challenging, and require commitment and toil, they drop it as quickly as they had taken it up. 'Ein Strohfeuer', as we say in German, and you have exactly the same saying: a straw fire.

Third, those with mind which are too busy. These are the ones who set their minds on the '*things of the flesh*' as Paul says. They do hear the message, it does take root in their hearts and minds, but they are simply too busy and too easily distracted by the demands of other things. Does that ring a bell? It certainly does with me. I often think I should have more time for this and that, but then somehow I never get round to it. The busyness of life is like the thorns and thistles that choke the word of the Lord, woe to me!

And finally, the fourth group are the ones with the right mind: Their minds are open and receptive like fertile soil, and they are indeed willing to listen and to learn. The Lord's words become deeply embedded in their hearts and minds, and they are able to understand, truly understand. They have thought things through, they know what they mean to them, and they act on them: This is the really important bit: these people translate their hearing into action, they bring forth fruit like seed sown in fertile ground. The yields can be enormous – who has ever heard of such a gain! Such gain justifies all the initial losses when sowing the seeds generously everywhere. And if one's stalk is a bit weak, and one's ear does not yield as much fruit as others do, so what of it? Jesus makes it clear that it does not matter how much fruit exactly is brought forth, the important bit is, there is fruit, may it be *'in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty'*, all according to our abilities. So the mark is set high, but never so high that we cannot reach it. Good news!?

Yes. But.... The human 'but', always eager to find excuses. We are good at that, but to be fair, human life is indeed extremely complex. Good things are often brought forth by bad things, our history is full of examples of it. Empires were built at the expense of the poor, but without the surplus of money and time, our modern societies would not have developed. Good or bad? Who wants to judge? We are all caught up in what Geoff called the 'collective sin of society'.

As a biologist, it seems to me that this is actually inbuilt in our creation. Without some cells gobbling up others, there is no life. Without bacteria keeping organisms on their toes and fighting, there is no evolution. Without viruses breaking down bacteria, there is no recycling of materials, etc, etc. All the good stuff depends to some extent on the bad, and the risk of some rogue virus causing havoc is an occupational hazard for the human condition.

Were things easier in Jesus' time? Surely not, for example the Romans were a brutal and ruthless occupying force, and at the same time, they brought peace and prosperity for many, and without the Roman Empire, Christianity might not have developed the way it did. Good or bad? Never an easy answer. But this does not let us off the hook.

Jesus is not talking about history, he is talking about us as individuals, and how we make decisions. Despite all the complexities of our lives, we have to get down on our knees and take time to think Jesus' words through. I cannot fully explain them to you, each and every one of us has to think them through for her- or himself. It is in each individual's hands (with the grace of God) how much fruit we produce. What is fruit? Well, think for yourself! It has to do with genuine mature discipleship. It does not grow overnight, it needs a long time to ripen, and we must keep working on it. It includes being receptive to God's word, to listen properly to others, to overcome our biases, wanting to want to do what God expects from us, bringing forth fruit. What does it mean for you personally? *Let anyone with ears listen! Amen.*