

## Flesh, Spirit and Soil

St Brandon's

Romans 8: 1-11; Matt. 13: 1-9, 18-23

16 July 2023

Our two readings, from Romans and Matthew's Gospel, might look as though they're addressing different issues and, in the case of Romans at least, look a little complicated. But in fact they're complementary, and the message they contain could not be more straightforward.

*We*, by the grace of God, have the Spirit of God dwelling within us, and as a result of that *we* live according to the Spirit and *our* minds are set on the things of the Spirit. Thus, *we* are able to live in a way that pleases God by producing the fruit of the Spirit which, Paul tells us elsewhere, consists of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23) – all things that *we* are well familiar with, of course.

It's unfortunate that there are those who do not live this way, but live according to 'the flesh', which, again, Paul elsewhere tells us consists of fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these (Galatians 5: 19-21) – not that *we* would know anything about such things, of course. But because *they* live that way, and because *their* minds are set on the things of the flesh, *they* cannot please God and *they* are, indeed, on a path that leads to death.

There's not a lot *we* can do about it, but the difference between *us* and *them*, couldn't be clearer. Just thank God *we're* on the right side.

Or, if you prefer this in picture language, *we* consist of good soil, soil that is able to receive the seed which is the word of God and bear fruit (the fruit of the Spirit, as we've seen). All of *us* have, at least, made the pass mark of 30 in this regard which is, you'll agree, a bar that's set pretty low. Some of you indeed may have reached merit level by achieving 60. There may even be a few among you who have reached nirvana and score a perfect 100. But all of *us* have, at least, made the pass mark and are on the right side.

It's unfortunate that there are those who haven't made it, who don't consist of good soil but, on the contrary, *they* are like hard-baked paths and don't understand, or *they* are like rocky ground and make a good start but don't allow the seed to take root, or *they* are like ground that is already full of thorns which chokes any chance of the seed producing fruit.

There's not a lot *we* can do about it, but the difference between *us* and *them*, couldn't be clearer. Just thank God *we're* on the right side.

Do you recognise that interpretation? Do you 'buy' that interpretation? Or could it be just a little more complicated than that?!

Well, let's start again with a closer look at the parable of the sower, or the parable of the soils. I have in my mind from long ago, probably from a children's Bible, a picture of a farmer

dressed in middle-eastern garb amid a rather English farmland scene with nice straight furrows of good, dark soil extending up the hillside, and the sower is scattering seed by hand. But as I was considering this a very different picture came into my mind. This was of a piece of urban wasteland, weeds everywhere though with some wild flowers – poppies, daisies – among them, some well-trodden paths because people used it as a short-cut, a few bits of concrete sticking up from its previous industrial use, but also about a quarter of it was land that had been dug over by local residents, and there was a rather random but nonetheless productive community garden there. Compared with my childhood idyllic picture, this piece of wasteland was a partly tragic, partly productive picture.

So let's suppose that it's into that picture that the sower comes. It might seem rather pointless, but the sower begins to sow anyway. And the sower sows everywhere – on the well-trodden paths, into the weeds, over the concrete, and into the patch of cultivated land. This seems very wasteful, the sower rather profligate though possibly, because of who the sower is, prodigal would be a better word. The sower is doing His job, and not a square inch (square millimetre, if you must) is missed.

And is the seed that the sower sows any good or is it possible that it's not up to very much (like my peas, for the second year running)? Well, had we had the OT reading set for today from Isaiah, we would have heard that the word that goes out from God's mouth, the seed, *would accomplish* that for which God purposed it, and *would succeed* in the thing for which it was sent (Is. 55: 10-11). The seed the sower sows is good seed.

So, if that's the case, but if the seed does not germinate and bear fruit, or does germinate but gets choked by the weeds, then quite clearly the problem lies not with the sower nor the seed but with the soil. But what is 'the soil'? And it turns out that the Greek word that's used is '*ge*', earth, from which we get ge-ology, ge-ography and so on.<sup>1</sup> And that takes us right back almost to the beginning of the Bible. For in the aftermath of what we know as 'the Fall' in Genesis 3, God tells Adam that 'the ground is cursed because of what they have done, in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are earth (*ge*) (although we would commonly say dust) and to earth (*ge* - dust) you shall return' (slight paraphrase of Genesis 3: 17-19).

Do you see what is going on here? Instead of the parable of the sower / soils being just a helpful image, this is saying that *we really are* the soil. We are *earth*, part of *the earth*, but taken out of it. And that earth is both tragic and productive – there are thorns and thistles, but it also, with a lot of hard work, produces bread. And since we are earth, the same is true of us – we are both tragic and productive, a tangle, if you like, of principle and promiscuity, generosity and greed, decency and dishonesty.

And it might be, from that, that my picture of a piece of urban wasteland with weeds and well-trodden paths and concrete, and yet also with wild flowers and a piece of cultivated land in the corner, is not only a picture of the tragedy and productivity of the earth, but also

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<sup>1</sup> See Cally Hammond in the Church Times, 14/7/23, commenting on these passages.

a picture of each of us. Perhaps we are, each of us, a mixed-up combination of the different types of soil.

To put it back into the words of our Gospel reading, is there part of me that hears the word of God but, wilfully or otherwise, does not understand it? Yes. Is there part of me that receives the word of God joyfully but when trouble or persecution comes would fall away? Yes. Is there part of me where the cares of this world and the lure of wealth choke the word? Yes. And is there, just perhaps, a part of me which, by God's grace and His Spirit, hears the word and bears fruit? Hopefully, yes. And has God given up on any part of me, or does He continue to cast his good seed almost recklessly over all of me in the hope that just a little more of it might take root and bear fruit, even producing some wild flowers among the weeds as well as some cultivated crops, however poor the ground may be? Yes. And is it possible that perhaps, by His Spirit but with as much help as I can give it, the good patch of soil might just expand a little? Yes.

And since the answer for me is 'yes' to all those questions, I wonder if it might just be the case that the same is true for you too. And if it so happens that it's the case for all of us, then perhaps we might also acknowledge that if we do happen to bear fruit and are on the 'right side' with God, it's got something, but actually very little, to do with us. That if we do have any merit at all it's in acknowledging that we are mostly pretty poor soil, and in acknowledging that we need God's help. That's why we begin every service with public confession – acknowledging before each other and before God that we've mucked it up again, that we haven't been as fruitful as we might have been, that there are still large patches of poor soil in our lives that need work on.

But if that's the case, how then do we differ from *them*? Just returning to the fruits of the Spirit – the other way of thinking about this that we're given this morning – I seem to know quite a lot of people who wouldn't call themselves Christian, but who seem to exhibit quite a bit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness (at least to others and their own beliefs), gentleness and self-control. Is there then something of the Spirit in *them*, even if *they* wouldn't understand it that way? Isn't there quite a bit of good soil in *them*, even if, just like *us*, they're a mixed-up combination of soils?

And if all of that, is there then really an *us* and *them*, such a clear divide, as I outlined at the beginning? Or are we really, to coin a phrase, all in this together, all in need of God's grace and His Spirit, all potentially in receipt of God's grace and His Spirit? And the only difference, for which we can take no credit at all, is that we acknowledge it and they don't. Yet.

Amen