

Isaiah 55:10-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The parable of the sower – again! Like the seasons that are implicit in the story, this very familiar parable comes round with predictable regularity. And given the Lectionary's three-year cycle, we get Matthew's version every third year. And it just so turned out that it was me who preached three years ago on precisely these same passages. But knowing that those of you who were here then would remember, pretty much word-for-word, what I said, I knew I couldn't just preach the same sermon again. But there are a few bits of that sermon that I thought were worth repeating, so if you were here then, see if you can spot those.

But let's begin not with the readings we have just heard, but with part of the OT reading we didn't have: "As the rain and the snow come down from above, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

And that might be a helpful introduction to the parable of the sower or, as I will suggest, what might be better as the parable of the soils. Both from Isaiah and from Matthew's account of the parable, we get the sense of God sending His word, the "word of the kingdom" as Jesus calls it, with purpose and determination and, ultimately, with success – "it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it".

But the first thing we might note from the parable is that the success rate isn't all that high. And that's partly because of the profligacy, or what we might even call the prodigality, of God the sower. He sows the seed in crazy places – on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns – which farmer does that? But it does suggest that there's an abundance of the seed, so that God's not too worried about there being enough to go round – there will still be enough to grow in good soil and actually produce fruit. But it does suggest a certain carelessness, or maybe better a certain degree of speculative sowing. Perhaps even the seed that lands on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns might produce something however unlikely that might seem.

And as I was considering this a picture came into my mind. This was of a piece of urban wasteland, weeds everywhere though with some wild flowers – poppies, daisies – scattered 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.

So, let's suppose that it's into that more contemporary picture that the sower comes. It might seem rather pointless, but the sower begins to sow anyway. And, as we've seen, the sower sows everywhere – on the well-trodden paths, into the weeds, over the

concrete, and into the patch of cultivated land. And 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 so much with the sower, nor the seed which is clearly of good quality, 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.¹ 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 *ge 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 a picture of each one of us. Perhaps we are, each of us, a mixed-up combination of the different types of soil.

And if that's the case, then the real question is how do we go about improving the soil, the soil of our lives? Now I know that I'm amongst many expert gardeners here who know much more than I do about improving soil, so that I might be on what we sometimes call rather shaky ground (sorry!). But bear with me.

What are the well-trodden paths in our lives – perhaps perennial habits that we know aren't good for us, but which we find difficult to break? And how can we then dig those up and start again? What are the bits of rocky ground in our lives where there's little soil – perhaps where there are difficulties in families, with friends, in community and where we find we don't have the resources within ourselves to reach out to try to repair those relationships. How can we clear the soil of the rocks? What are the thorns in our lives – the cares of the world and the lure of wealth that choke us? How can we pull up the thorns, clear the ground for more productive things to grow in our lives?

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

And then we can take the analogy a bit further by asking what we can do by way of compost and mulch (organic of course) to actually improve the soil? What are the good things we can add in our lives to improve the soil still further, so that it produces not just 30-fold but 60- or even 100-fold? Good friends, good books, good music, good worship ... and so on. You might even hear a good sermon from time to time, and take it to heart.

But, two things to finish with. First, this makes it sound as though it is entirely our responsibility to do all of this, that we have to do all the hard work of improving the soil of our lives. But that's where our Romans reading comes in. It's too long and complicated to go into in any detail, but as you can see Paul is contrasting life in the flesh (the human person in all its frailty, a mixed-up combination of different types of soil) with life in the Spirit. And he ends by saying, "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 who dwells in you." God doesn't just sow the seed, the word of the kingdom, into our hearts, but by His Spirit continues to nurture it within us, helping us to overcome the well-trodden paths, the rocks, the thorns, and providing compost and mulch.

And secondly, while trying our best and being open to the Spirit at work in us, so that we become more fruitful in all the different aspects of our lives, it's important to know that our ultimate salvation does not depend on this. This is not a gospel of good works in which only those who get 30% or above, those who produce 30-fold, get into heaven. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" says Paul. So, this is not to earn our salvation, but to respond faithfully to the God who sows His seed in our hearts confident that "it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Amen