

It seems to me that the parable of the sower comes up with uncommon regularity. Perhaps because it has a lot to teach us. I'm trying to look at it from a different angle today.

Tom Wright says "Many of Jesus' parables are like mazes, designed to challenge his listeners to work out for themselves how to get to the heart of things." The parable of the sower is no exception. As Jesus himself explains, to the 12, later after the crowds have left that the meaning of the parable is how we respond to the gospel. The seed is the word of God and the thorns, birds, and dry path are metaphors for the way we react when we hear it. Is the word quickly forgotten by our distractions or can we allow it to settle in and enable us to be transformed?

Getting to the heart of things. Heart is the key word for me today. When we think of the word heart what do we think of? Other than a vital muscular pump in our chests! Maybe the centre of our emotions. The huge number of verses that include the word heart shows us just how important the heart is in biblical terms. It is not merely our emotional centre but the innermost animating centre of all we do. Our deepest loves, desires and ambitions pour out of our hearts.

So linking back to the parable of the sower I would like to suggest to you that our ability to receive the word of God depends of the condition of our hearts.

Are our hearts open, teachable, able to receive or are they filled with other stuff? Are they congested with worry and anxiety? Fears for the future? We speak of broken hearts, shattered by loss and grief. Have our hearts got crusty, hard areas where we have found it impossible to totally let go of and forgive past hurts? Areas where we have closed our hearts off, maybe to ourselves as well as to God and others. Any time we have thought no I just can't go there, might give us a clue. Some of you who know my history might have an idea where that is for me.

Of course this isn't what we want at all, we want to be able to say our hearts are always filled with love and hope.

The Bible tells us in the Old and New Testaments that the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". (Matt 22:37). I want to do this but with a heart full of distractions how do I stand a chance!

Just a few minutes ago in our confession we prayed "we have not loved you with our whole heart". I'm relieved that at least I'm not on my own in this! Lord please help!

What's that verse in Ezekiel (36:26) "I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." A heart of flesh, a soft heart, well yes that's better than a hard heart. A soft heart would be more loving. But, oh dear, a soft heart feels more pain, it means we are more open to empathising with the pain of the world. That sounds even worse. I want to be available to people but feel more pain, is that part of the deal? Yes I think it is, but as Gilly was telling us last week we are not alone, Jesus is beside us, we just need to think of the Cross to know this is true.

I think we might find Ignatian Spirituality helpful here, at least I do. Although Ignatius is a 15th century saint, he was very practical and based all his work, most famously the Spiritual Exercises, on his own experience, his own walk with God. This is why I am so drawn to his teaching. He says "God is the God of all things" and can be seen everywhere in everyday life, there is no natural

spiritual divide. I find this so encouraging. God isn't distant and uncaring, as Jesus clearly demonstrates.

St Ignatius founded the Jesuits and as his work progressed he recognised some common patterns and adjusted his writings accordingly. He tells us that when we choose to say yes to Jesus, maybe in baptism, desire to follow Him and want to serve Him, then our heart belongs to Him. My heart belongs to Jesus. This is a given. But why aren't I more aware of it?

We know there is evil in the world, St Ignatius refers to the "enemy of human nature". This enemy hates it that we want to draw closer to Jesus and will do whatever he can to keep us ineffective as Christians.(back to the parable, birds snatching the seeds, thorns choking the seedlings). But because my heart belongs to Jesus the enemy's only access point is my mind. I can be anxious, fearful, filled with questions, doubts. I hope I'm not alone here! These thoughts can get a grip of us, so much so, that our hearts can feel congested. That's how it can feel but it isn't the truth. It's no wonder we find it hard to sense God's love and for His word to take root in us. What can we do?

This is where feeding our lives with truth is so important. My heart belongs to Jesus, no matter what thoughts I have. One writer says "Evil becomes apparent when exposed to the Truth." Truth with a capital T, truth being the person of Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. Our physical hearts keep us alive pumping oxygen around our bodies. We could see the gospels as a form of oxygen, vital to life, keeping us in touch with the Truth and enabling our hearts to feel less congested so they are open to hear the good news.

Back to where we started with Tom Wright's comment. We've had a wander round the maze. Where has it got us? Have we found the centre? I'm struck by the fact that in the middle of our reading Jesus quotes a prophecy from Isaiah. Verse 15. "they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." We turn to Jesus. He heals us. Perhaps it isn't our hearts we want to focus on, it's Jesus and His heart for us. He is in the centre of the maze, waiting for us. Thank you Lord.