

Parable of the Sower The Sower, the seed and the soil
(see also Mark 4:1-9/13-20 and Matthew 13:1-9/18-23)

As we continue with our exploration of the parables, one of the defining aspects of the Sower, is that it prompts the disciples to ask Jesus, 'why do you speak in parables?' and Christ's answer 'That the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them' is, I think, integral to its interpretation.

He describes the four types of ground on which the seed falls:

On the path - God's word is heard but barely lands before Satan drowns it out;

On rocky ground – God's word is heard and accepted but only until times get tough.

Amongst thorns – God's word is accepted and acted on, but earthly distractions soon take over;

And on good soil – God's word is heard, accepted, understood and bears fruit.

In short, and for the sake of this sermon I am going to define them as Empty, Rocky, Thorny and Fruitful.

Now I am sure we all aspire to the latter category and have experienced the fundamental peace of doing God's will; but if we are honest are there times when we have been, and occasionally still are, one of the three lesser categories.

The fact that we are present here today, or watching at home, suggests we are unlikely to be empty, but were we empty once? God speaks to us at different stages of our life. I was lucky enough to have a Christian upbringing but that does not mean there were not times, particularly in early adulthood, where God was a very long way down my list of priorities. And I am sure we all know of people who may have been fruitful but, for a variety of reasons, have become empty.

Even if Christ is established in our lives, there are inevitably times when things get testing and our faith literally becomes a bit rocky. Considering today's world, when we see the horrors of the war in Ukraine, or that people are going hungry in order to feed their loved ones, or when a gunman kills nineteen innocent children and two teachers – it takes a seriously hardy spiritual constitution not to feel rocky sometimes.

And never have superficial, earthly distractions been more prevalent, or tempting, or easily available. Has monetary wealth ever been more lauded? In a world that moves at such an unrelenting pace, few of us can deny that we don't get distracted or thorny more often than we should.

I think accepting that we sometimes fall short, is actually a timely, and ultimately reassuring, reminder that we are all a work in progress, and will remain so for the rest of our lives. And while it is, of course, vital to nurture our own relationship with God, our own roots, I wonder if the key to becoming truly fruitful, is actually in how we nurture others. There is guidance in John chapter 17: one of Christ's final prayers on this earth, and even though he is about to endure unimaginable agony, he is thinking of us and all those that will follow.

... I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message, I pray that they will all be one.'

And to be one, can we actually use our own experiences of being empty or rocky or thorny to empathise with and encourage other people, whether they be here in church, at home, at work and throughout our lives.

So how do we put this into practise. Well, I am a keen gardener and adore being outside; the proven power of nature to heal, the way it speaks to something within us that feels inherent, rather than learned is, for me, compelling evidence of Gods' hand at work. You'll notice I said keen rather than competent and my great mistake is to habitually ignore the wise words of legendary plantswoman, Beth Chatto who coined that famous horticultural phrase 'right plant, right place'. If I like the look of a plant it is going in the ground and is just going to have deal with the fact that our garden is north facing with predominantly dry shade. Having planted the doomed specimen in the ground I put the label, that shows the plant at its absolute best on one side and instructions of how to look after it on the other, in a pot in my shed - I am afraid to say that there are at least four to five times more labels in that pot than there are surviving plants in my garden.

The point I am trying to make, is that conditions are vital and while I obviously cannot reorientate my garden to the south, we can all do our bit to create the right conditions, the right soil, in which our own faith, and more importantly that of others can grow and flourish. As Desmond Tutu said, 'My humanity is bound up in yours, because we can only be human together.'

Transforming Trinity is a wonderful example of this, on a grand scale, the equivalent of ploughing and planting an entire field, that will not only nurture those here but will hopefully bring people through those doors for the very first time. Our contribution to this can, of course, be financial; but it can also, just as importantly, be an idea, an observation, a piece of feedback on the way we worship and use this building, that may not have even been considered, and could make all the difference. So please, fill in those forms.

But something on a small scale, done in God's name, can have huge consequences. I know declaring our faith takes courage, particularly with people we do not know well but, as I wrote in the parish magazine, in my experience, few have never even considered the existence of God. And it is important to note and be encouraged by the fact that, in our parable, regardless of what they do with it, everyone hears the word. Just because someone is empty, does not mean they cannot become fruitful again – we only have to remember the parable of the lost son and the father's joy at his return. So could it be, that a modest reference to prayer, or stating that we are going to church on Sunday, could that be the light and water that allows a seed of faith, even a mustard seed, to germinate?

A similar personal experience came for me twelve years ago when we first moved here and my son Barnaby was just one year old. Back then there were three services on a Sunday morning, and baby Barnes and I used to attend the traditional rather than family service. More often than not he was the only child there and like most one year olds, he didn't always observe the silences in the order of service, and I began to wonder if I was doing the right thing. So one Sunday morning, while pushing the pram down Whitmore Lane, I prayed for guidance. A few minutes later I was sat in the rearmost pew and the toy I had bought to keep Barnaby occupied was

already losing its appeal. And I was honestly just about to leave when someone (in the congregation today), who I barely knew, came over with a whole bag of toys and said 'it is lovely to see you both, and please don't worry about the noise, my son used to run up and down the aisle dressed as Buzz Lightyear'. A thoughtful gesture and a few encouraging words meant my prayer was answered – this plant was watered.

So I think it boils down to that kind of commitment, to ourselves and more importantly to others:

To nurturing those who are empty;

To sympathising with those who are rocky;

To guiding each other when we are thorny - as Bishop Steven observed, billions are spent every day on advertising, the vast majority of which is designed to convince us that we need more than we already have...

What we have is a God who:

forgives us through Christ's sacrifice,

who guides us, if only we let him,

and who loves us throughout life's trials, before finally welcoming us home.

What more could we possibly need than that?

And if we truly believe it, the least we can do is share it, as Christ shared the knowledge of the Kingdom of heaven, through parables, and in doing so become genuinely and abidingly fruitful.

I want to leave you with a verse by JRR Tolkien that seems appropriate:

'All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.'

Michael Grist

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