

SERMON 16 JULY 2017

A seed is an extraordinary thing; sometimes a tiny thing that holds within it everything that can bring life as it germinates, puts out roots, searching down into the earth to find water and hold secure. The seed begins to push out shoots upwards, towards the light; leaves form and begin to unfurl, responding to sunlight, creating more energy as the plant takes on the shape and form that are embedded in its DNA. One tiny seed, such as the mustard seed Jesus talked about. These are the stuff of life and without seeds human life would falter and the world would be devoid of colour, beauty and nourishment.

There are many gardeners among us here. There are many of us seeing how, even in the winter-cold nights and days, there are still signs of life waiting to emerge again. But sitting here in this building of stone and wood, we are far removed from farm fields and country life. The people who once roamed the hills and bush of this area would have known all about the growth and life-cycles of trees and bushes and plants and would have known how they could support life. Back in Galilee, life for Jesus and all the people was intimately connected with the land and what it grew. They knew also that the Scriptures were full of connections to crops, to animals, to bread, to water and to wine, to herbs and fruit, indeed the things that sustain physical life are part of the story of God's provision and the people's awareness of how much they depended on God for their survival.

Jesus, sitting in a boat at the edge of the Lake so he could have some space to address the crowds, teaches the people about God in their lives, not through hard facts, but in stories they could relate to, parables that engaged their imagination and touched their hearts. Maybe there was a farmer there, in a

field near the lake, taking handfuls of seed and scattering it from side to side as he walked along. Look at the farmer, says Jesus, and gives them this image of extravagant, apparently carefree scattering of the seed, allowing it to fall where it will. Yes, some never really has a chance to bring forth a crop. Some of it feeds the birds. Only a portion will grow strong. It seems strangely inefficient, but, Jesus says, there will still be a bountiful crop to harvest.

So, how would people understand this? They would go away remembering the word picture he had painted for them, and would wonder about what they had heard and about who Jesus was. Isn't this how we grow, by struggling with the things that don't seem to make sense at first, until something happens and then we have an "aha" moment? All in God's time. But for the disciples, Matthew records, Jesus explained things. So maybe we, in turn, do not have to struggle so hard with the meaning. We have probably all thought about these different types of soil and realise that we are made up of such within us: those times and situations when we feel dried up and hard, when nothing good seems to find a place to grow; the times when we feel the stirring of new life and creativity, but it just fades away to nothing. There are times when our spirits open up and we know that there is a blossoming of what is good and true. We know these things in our lives. But there is more to this parable than this individualised response.

The seed, we are told is God's word, and while Jesus refers to the Son of Man as being the sower for those around him at the time, in effect, this is about God's activity in the world. So imagine the image again: the sower is moving about his land, scattering wide the seeds. The word of God is apparently randomly, generously cast far and wide. There is no selective treatment of

seed being planted in specially prepared soil and carefully tilled. The seed, the word, is spread wide to fall everywhere, even though much of it will never produce a harvest.

This reminds me that there is nobody anywhere that does not bear within them the seed of the divine. There is nowhere that God's word is not lying, waiting, dormant maybe, trodden on perhaps, but always there. God's word is not held in safe-keeping within the church, as though it were a greenhouse on the good soil. The seed is not being kept safe until more ground is prepared and ready to receive it. The seed is out there. The purpose of the good soil could well be to grow strong plants that will produce more seed for future scattering.

The point of a parable is to encourage our imagining, not to create rigid particulars or formulae. So, as we listen to this parable today, what does it help us imagine? Maybe we can imagine ourselves giving more time and space and sunlight to allow the seeds of God's word to put down even deeper roots, to grow within us, because we have already been gifted with some understanding of what Christ's word speaks to us, and what Christ's word of life can be for the whole world. Perhaps as the parable reminds us that this word of life is as much out there in the bustle of life, we might imagine how that is happening in our neighbourhood, our city, even though there are many contending words that can smother that word. If we can imagine that, we could also come to understand that we might be able to learn of God's word and work by seeing what is happening in the world. Maybe we don't just learn about God in the church but also out there.

The point of the parable was to help the disciples see that they could indeed be part of God's work in the lanes and with the people around them, moving out from their small circle. It might seem for us that there are insurmountable barriers blocking our ability both to speak the word of God out there and for that word to be heard. That can disable us and turn us back to what is comfortable in our own patch of ground, but this connection with the presence of God's word does not just run in one direction. Maybe the image of the seed being scattered so extravagantly suggests we should be aware of how the word is speaking in these places already. Maybe we are just being invited to join the conversations, conversations about life as we all know it.

But how does the word speak? How are the seeds encouraged to grow? It is not by a heavy-handed attack with a big spade. Sometimes the pressure of some sects to save souls leads to a particular emphasis on conversion. But the word is already whispering and never ceases to do so. Often all that is needed is a listening companion who can recognise the voice. A wise old friend who had spent 40 years as a missionary in North India. I always remembering him giving advice to a younger minister who was going there for the first time. He just said "You will find that God has been there for a long time." Christ's presence is discovered in so many ways.

Back then, as Jesus spoke, people didn't have a clear understanding of what he meant, or who he was. He met them and, as his life touched theirs, seeds of hope and possibility were planted. There were verses left out in our reading today, maybe because they seem obscure and to tie us into knots even more. They are verses that relate back to the prophet Isaiah and words being spoken in such a way that "seeing they do not perceive and hearing they do not

listen". Why would God make things so difficult? It seems frustrating. How can people who have had no connection to any life of faith possibly understand? We are left to imagine.

Matthew, in his gospel, always portrays Jesus, not just as the fulfilment of prophecy but as a prophet himself. He is a prophet of God's Kingdom which, he says, is both here and now and not yet. So, we cannot understand and we won't until the fulfilment of all things. But what we do have is Jesus, who, in himself, is a parable. He is a parable in the way he lives his life, in the way he encourages people to use their imagination and engage with living in the way they are beginning to discover: the way in which the sick are healed, a new wisdom engages people's hearts and minds, a wholeness and a just enfolding of all things is envisaged as a real possibility. This is the word, the word that describes the Kingdom. Jesus lives the word. It is the word that counters all the dark forces that threaten growth, those things we thought about last week as we recognised the truth of the words "the good I would I do not do".

There is a hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule which begins with the words "Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets. No-one is his neighbour, all alone he eats. Listen Lord Jesus, I am lonely too. Make me friend or stranger, fit to wait on you." I used to hear this in my head when I was living in an Edinburgh slum area, visiting people in soulless concrete housing blocks. I wasn't going there as a minister, or even as a Christian. I lived there and was employed by The Save the Children Fund. I learned an enormous amount from the people I met and spent time with about how they coped with life and everything it threw at them, or didn't. More than anything they all wanted to matter to someone.

Is there really such a divide between the good places where we feel we can safely grow on good soil and those harder places beyond? It is all about life, people whose stories all hold similar experiences of pain and joy and so on. What Jesus wanted for his disciples was for them to be enabled to go and engage with everyone as he did, meeting people and knowing that each one of us bears within us the seed of the divine, the word of life; the word enables the imagination to discover ways of wholeness, of justice and grace. This is the work of God, not the work we have to initiate. We are being asked to join in what is there. Maybe we can't hear it distinctly or see it clearly. Maybe we can't understand it. But the call is to be part of it.