

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words of the Psalmist are for our thinking this morning: “There are many who pray: ‘Give us more blessings, O LORD. Look on us with kindness!’ But the joy that you have given me is more than they will ever have with all their corn and wine.”

(Psalm 4: 6 – 7)

Hymn CH4 229 – We plough the fields and scatter

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

God who is, God who has been, God who will be; faithful God, journeying God, God with us; You are our God.

Father God, beyond us in mystery, with us in struggle, and guiding us onwards. Your faithfulness we praise. Your name we call upon. Your presence we worship.

For we are here, on this holy ground, in this time, offering our lives and ourselves to You. We come open to Your Spirit, and trusting in the love of Your Son, Jesus.

God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, Your faithfulness echoes down the centuries, yet too often our commitment is much less certain. Forgive us, Lord.

God of Moses, of Mary, of Peter, Your call invites us to follow Your way of love, yet too often we seek excuses and an easier path. Forgive us, Lord.

God of Israel, of Palestine, of all nations, Your concern is for justice and peace, yet too often we ignore the cries of the oppressed. Forgive us, Lord.

God of gardens, of wilderness, of harvest, of all creation, You have given us such wonders to care for, yet too often we don't acknowledge the damage we do. Forgive us, Lord.

God of justice, of peace, of love, help us to know that You do forgive us, setting us free from our past failings, making us new, and inviting us on a new stage in our journey with You. Thank You, Lord.

Father God, God of goodness, or mercy, of grace and of love, meet with us this morning and teach more about you and your ways. For we are your disciples, and you are our God.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reading: Mark 4: 1 – 20 – The Parable of the Sower

¹Again Jesus began to teach beside Lake Galilee. The crowd that gathered round him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it. The boat was out in the water, and the crowd stood on the shore at the water's edge. ²He used parables to teach them many things, saying to them:

³"Listen! Once there was a man who went out to sow corn. ⁴As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some of it fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. The seeds soon sprouted, because the soil wasn't deep. ⁶Then, when the sun came up, it burnt the young plants; and because the roots had not grown deep enough, the plants soon dried up. ⁷Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes, which grew up and choked the plants, and they didn't produce any corn. ⁸But some seeds fell in good soil, and the plants sprouted, grew, and produced corn: some had thirty grains, others sixty, and others 100." ⁹And Jesus concluded, "Listen, then, if you have ears!"

The Purpose of the Parables

¹⁰When Jesus was alone, some of those who had heard him came to him with the twelve disciples and asked him to explain the parables. ¹¹“You have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God,” Jesus answered. “But the others, who are on the outside, hear all things by means of parables, ¹²so that, ‘They may look and look, yet not see; they may listen and listen, yet not understand. For if they did, they would turn to God, and he would forgive them.’”

Jesus Explains the Parable of the Sower

¹³Then Jesus asked them, “Don't you understand this parable? How, then, will you ever understand any parable? ¹⁴The sower sows God's message. ¹⁵Some people are like the seeds that fall along the path; as soon as they hear the message, Satan comes and takes it away. ¹⁶Other people are like the seeds that fall on rocky ground. As soon as they hear the message, they receive it gladly. ¹⁷But it does not sink deep into them, and they don't last long. So when trouble or persecution comes because of the message, they give up at once. ¹⁸Other people are like the seeds sown among the thorn bushes. These are the ones who hear the message, ¹⁹but the worries about this life, the love for riches, and all other kinds of desires crowd in and choke the message, and they don't bear fruit. ²⁰But other people are like the seeds sown in good soil. They hear the message, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirty, some sixty, and some 100.”

All Age Talk

Hymn CH4 231 – For the fruits of all creation,

Sermon – ‘Sowing the seed’

This morning I want us to picture a scene in our minds. We are with the crowd, listening to this man who is sitting in a boat, a little off on the water, speaking to us. He points, and we see the sloping hillside that leads down to the lake, where the grain fields run down to the water. It is sowing time, and there are men out there, carrying huge baskets of seed, draped over their shoulders, and as they walk up and down, up, and down, up, and down, scattering handfuls of

seeds left and right. We look out to the middle of the water, and in the middle-distance fishermen ply their trade, casting their nets out from their boats, letting them sink into the water, then slowly hauling them up, disentangling the fish from the mesh as the nets slowly spill their cargo back into the boat.

We have seen this scene many times before. For these are the scenes of our Palestinian homeland. Our fathers, brothers, sons are out there, working the land, fishing the waters, earning a living, breaking their backs, during the long hot days, risking their lives among the stormy waves, to put food on the table, and money for us to sustain our families. These are familiar scenes. We see them every day.

The man in the boat points back again to the hillside. We know the Galilean farmer, sowing his seeds liberally on the ground; some on the hard path, some on the rocky soil, some amongst the thorns, some over the thin earth that barely covers the wide shelf of rock underneath; some on the good soil. He will return, after a while, with his plough, to plough the seed into the soil, ploughing in the thorns, scraping over the surface of the rock shelf. Once the farmer has done this, he has an even longer wait. Wait and see what kind of harvest he will have.

The Galileans would have known all of that as they watched and listened. They would have seen the golden seed, rich with life, spread from pouches by the steady, rhythmic swing of the Sower's arm, covering the whole area from which he was already anticipating a crop.

However, this story is not simply about ancient farming practices. It is a parable – a story that invites its hearers to see something they might not otherwise see. It draws us in to search for meanings. We are meant to see the picture that Jesus paints. Hear the words He speaks and then find that we are examining our lives, and in particular, the way we respond to what Jesus teaches. We are led to ask for ourselves, as Jesus intended, 'What kind of soil am I? How do I respond to God's Word?

The seed is the Word of God's Kingdom. The sowing of the seed is intentional; all seed is good; all of it contains the rich promise of God's Kingdom and God's

love. This story is told to make its hearers reflect on themselves, and their situation, and, also, to give some answers as to why preaching and teaching God's Good News, can result in so many different responses. It is, I believe, a parable about the state of our hearts when it come to our faith and our commitment to what Jesus calls us to do and to be.

For, some hearts are hard to the Good News. Like the seed that falls on the path, there are people who hear what Jesus has to say but never follow. Discipleship never starts. Unable, or unwilling, to open their hearts to the possibility of faith, there are many people in our world like that. And, if we are being truthful, at times, we can be like that too. We hear but we don't listen. The words go in, pass through our brains and our hearts, but leave not the slightest of traces.

Grief, or anger, or pride, or fear, can make us hard-hearted. Times when we cannot hear or do not want to hear what God has to say to us. This is not about honest doubt, or uncertainty. This about times when we close our minds, our hearts, our lives, to anything that God says to us because we do not like its implications, to way we must behave, or things we might have to do or change about ourselves. The seed that falls on the path, easily picked off, because hard hearts and minds are closed. Is that something you can identify with, asks this parable?

Rocky ground is also a difficult place for the seed of God's Good News to fall. For all of us, at different times, there can be obstacles, trouble and even, persecution. Mark's Gospel, written around 60AD, was written at a time when Christian communities feared for their lives. Both Jewish and Roman authorities were at turns suspicious or hostile. It is hard to be faithful to God when you're going through times of trouble. The Gospel was written for those struggling communities who were facing hard times and were tempted to give up.

For us today, it is the perennial temptation to trim the Christian message, to make it easier for everybody, and produce a Gospel of no depth, a fair-weather religion. There is a little interest, but nothing for the roots of faith to grown in to or hold on to. The soil is too shallow. I wonder if this something that you

have seen in your own life? A realisation, a fear, an embarrassment, that your faith is not really all that deep? That you don't know enough, or want to make the effort to know enough, about what it is that you believe. Content to glide across the surface, but whenever a hard time, or a painful time, or a fearful time comes – there is not much to sustain you. The shallow heart of faith. Is that something that you can identify with, ask this parable?

For there are people who hear what God has to say and respond positively. Their faith grows significantly, and they get involved in the life of the Christian community, but, because there is so much going on in their lives, so many rival distractions, so many competing priorities, that what they believe and how they show that belief, become stifled.

Like the choking thorns in Jesus' parable, faith is edged out, marginalised, and overcome. I wonder, are there times in your life when your faith, and the way you practice that faith, is 'choked'? Work can do it. An obsessive need to make money – even for good reasons – and the long hours that go with it. Family can do it – 'I'd come to church, I'd get more involved, but the boys need to go to Sunday football, the girls have dance classes, we rarely get the chance to get together as a family, we like to go out and do something different on a Sunday, the garden needs done, the weather's nice, I slept in, I needed to catch up on the housework and the ironing. We can all fill in our own 'reason'.

Now most of these things are not bad in themselves, but you can see where Jesus is going with this. As soon as we begin to let other priorities crowd in on our faith life, than things start going downhill. It is hard, I know that, but we all know it happens. 'I go to church every week' turns into 'I go to church once a fortnight, once a month, whenever I'm free', or perhaps, 'I need or want to get married there' or, 'I have to have my child baptised.' The overcrowded heart – too busy, too distracted, too much keener on other priorities and, as a result, faith is edged out, stifled. Today's parable asks, if that is something we can identify with.

Yet, Jesus' parable does not end with the hurdles and problems of responding to God's word, but with responses that are filled with abundance. Sometimes,

our hearts are like the good soil, and there are multiple crops of wonderful, exciting, moving things. Thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold. The mystery growth of faith in our lives produces tremendous things in our lives, in our families, in our community, in our church. God's creative Grace overflows our lives and surpasses anything we could ever have imagined. A harvest like that feeds a family, helps us meet our obligations, and gives us enough to pass on and share.

Jesus final picture is of the good heart – one of freedom and plenty – hearing and responding in faith and action. Is that something you can identify with, says this parable? Standing on the shore, seeing the sloping hillside running down to the lake where the grain fields meet the water, the first hearers of this parable thought, wondered, understood, misunderstood, what Jesus was saying. Perhaps, we do too, but we need to hear that somehow, and in different ways and at different times in our lives, these penetrating, disturbing, encouraging words of Jesus apply to us. We are meant to reflect on our lives, and how we live them, and how we respond to what God is saying to us today, and what we are going to do about that.

One final thought. This is, ultimately, a story of encouragement. Though it explains why so few people respond positively to the message of God's Kingdom, it does provide encouragement to us to keep on sowing. Some of the seed will fail, but some of the see will thrive, and produce an abundant harvest. We never know which.

So, the Parable of the Sower is a multi-layered story. A story about the goodness of God's message; about the nature of our response to that messages that makes us examine our hearts and consider our own life choices, decisions, attitudes, and prejudices; about the need to keep on sowing the seed because sometimes it does fall on good soil, and the blessing and abundance of good people doing good things is over whelming.

A Sower went to sow – the key parable of Jesus' ministry and the key to how we understand our own lives and our response to God's Word to us today.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn CH4 103 – Fill your hearts with joy and gladness,

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Father we come to you today to thank you for this time of year when all the crops have been tenderly looked after and we are given this time to celebrate Harvest.

Father, just a tiny seed, but with such hope of life, energy, and possibility, crammed into a tiny shell waiting for warmth and moisture to unlock its potential.

Father, you are our creator and bestower of life. You are the giver of our gifts, that are planted in the warm earth of your love. Shower us with Grace so that we are awake to the possibilities of change and alive to work for your kingdom.

Help us today to follow Jesus and spread His Word. Help us to help those who have fallen by the wayside and bring them into your world of love and fellowship.

Help us today to share our harvest and give to those who need it most.

May we thank you each and every day for your strength and guidance in your Church and help us to be grateful for what we have. Thank you for your blessings today and every day in your name. Amen.

Hymn CH4 233 – Come, you thankful people come,

Benediction

So, may the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit rest upon you and all whom you love this day and always. Amen.

