

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Parable of the Sower

13 *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!"*

"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

We are currently in Year A of the Church of England lectionary and a time which some call 'parable season' when we are encouraged to dwell on the well-known parables that are recorded in Matthew Chapter 13.

Parables form nearly a third of Jesus's teaching, and he used these stories to help bring seemingly abstract and often complex concepts such as justice and mercy near for people using imagery that was familiar from their daily lives. Parables are literally 'para' near 'ballo' bringers – 'near bringers'.

Today's reading focuses on Jesus's use of the familiar image of a farmer sowing seed to help explain some of the complexity of our human nature. In this parable, the sower is faced with the extraordinary challenges of sowing on less than fertile ground. We are told that some seeds he sowed fell on the path, others on rocky ground and some among thorn and weeds – with only a portion of the seed falling on good soil.

Now no-one who knew the first thing about farming would actually sow with such abandon, scattering precious seed far and wide on highways and byways. And not surprisingly the sower had mixed results. The seed that fell on the path was eaten up. That which fell on rocky ground with little soil, sprung up quickly but was soon scorched by the sun and withered away, while other seed was choked by thorns and weeds. Only the seed that fell on good soil went on to produce a harvest.

When his baffled disciples questioned him on the meaning of this tale, Jesus went on to explain that the different ground conditions in his parable are a metaphor for how people hear and respond to his word.

When we hear but do not understand, the good news is snatched away like birds snatching seed from a path. Some are initially elated to hear God's words but like the seed on rocky ground their faith has no roots and withers away when trouble or persecution comes. Others' faith is choked out of them by the weeds and thorns of the cares of the world. It is only when God's word falls on the good soil of understanding it produces a wonderful harvest.

I am sure we would all like to think of ourselves as good soil where God's word takes root and flourishes, but we all contain within ourselves the ability to be any of these different forms of ground. Within all of us lies the potential for God's word to blossom and transform, but also for belief to rise up but then die away as the concerns of the world overtake us. And at different times of our lives we may respond to God's word in different ways. This is the reality of living as flawed 'sinful' human beings in a broken world.

We live in a world fractured by our own disobedience and rebellion. And God told Adam that as a result of mankind's failure to obey God that our efforts would be frustrated by 'thorns and thistles' brought forth from the earth. That having fractured our relationship with our creator, life on earth would be hard.

Over the past few months we have been provided with a brutal reminder of that reality. Most of us alive today have come to believe in the inevitability and power of human progress but the coronavirus that has swept across the world taking lives and security has challenged people at a very deep level.

Covid-19 has affected us all and as our sense of normality has been threatened, many have found themselves seeking meaning in new ways. The thorns and weeds of this terrible pandemic has caused people of different faiths and none to question anew how such things can happen.

Sadly some people's belief has been choked out of them by the cares of this time, as they struggle to find God in the midst of the pandemic. But for many this crisis has led to a re-evaluation of their secular world view and a reconnection with God - evidenced by the

enormous increase in people who say that they have been praying and those who have been attending church for the first time online.

The great writer and thinker C.S. Lewis described our pain as the megaphone that God sometimes uses to rouse a deaf world. I am not suggesting that God created Covid-19 but rather than he can use our experiences of living in this world we have fractured by pointing us back to him, our creator.

God does not only sow his seed in good soil. He loves us with such abandon that he scatters that love far and wide. He does not want to miss the chance of reaching even one lost soul. And in these times, the thorns and weeds, may be the very thing that brings us back to a deeper relationship with God.