

July 12th 2020 Sermon for 5th Sunday after Trinity –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

Bible Reading Romans 8:1-11

Gospel Reading Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

So let us pray. Heavenly Father, may the words that I speak be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living word who is Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Our reading today from St Matthew's Gospel gives the account of Jesus telling the parable of the sower and the seed and it gives us a fascinating insight into what an amazing teacher Jesus was and is.

And perhaps before we look at the passage can I just say Thank You to all our dedicated teachers, and especially to those who are just simply passionate about sharing their knowledge with others. Those who have that wonderful ability and imagination to use things that are around them, our everyday experiences, in getting that message, that point over, as they try to teach us something new and insightful. I'm also amazed at the stamina that our teachers have. They're standing in front of children hour after hour and they get to that final period of the day when they have that really difficult class and they've been on their feet all day and they have to engage with a bunch of kids who themselves are also tired and they want to go home, and they have to keep their interest.

So with all of that in mind, let us look at this passage together, and let us marvel at what a great teacher, the greatest teacher of all that Jesus was and is. I'm struck by the opening words of our passage "that same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it while all the people stood on the shore." That same day. It makes us wonder what else Jesus had been doing that day. So its worth us looking back over the previous chapter which begins with Jesus with his disciples, they're hungry, they're in a corn field and they begin to eat the ears of corn. At this point the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of acting unlawfully because it is the sabbath. And so Jesus has to debate and argue with the Pharisees and remind them that the sabbath is made for us, not us for the sabbath. And to emphasise the point he then goes on to heal a man with a shrivelled hand. Why? So that that man could work and provide for his family. And this is the point of the sabbath. It is a rest day. It is meant to give us the strength so that we can work and provide for our families. Of course the Pharisees complain that Jesus is healing on the sabbath and all of this must have been exhausting for Jesus. And so we are told he withdraws to a quiet place, but the crowds follow. There is more healing, there is more teaching. In fact there are so many people, that, in a crowded house Jesus' own mother and brothers can't get near him. So you can imagine that by the time we get to our reading, its quite late in the day when Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Maybe he was hoping for a bit of a breather. But there was going to be none of that, because yet again the crowds follow. They are eager to learn, and they want more. Like all good teachers he's not going to miss that opportunity. So he gets in a boat in order to address the crowds. Actually this is a very effective way of addressing a large crowd. But standing in the boat on the lake, with the crowds on the bank, it works a bit like an amphitheatre with the boat and the lake being the stage, and

then the crowds on the bank, banked up can easily see and indeed hear what Jesus has to say.

So what does the great teacher do so as to provide this impromptu lesson for his eager students? Well he uses the very situations he finds himself, to be the subject of the lesson. As he addresses the large crowd he is probably wondering how many will remember what he has said in the morning. How many will remember what he has said in a week's time. He may well be thinking they are all nodding their heads in agreement and approval but how many will take this message to heart and change the way they live and accept this invitation to discover what it means to be someone who walks with God, to be a disciple, to grow in faith and to discover their full potential as the person that God intends them to be.

So he tells the parable of the sower and the seeds. And immediately he will have grabbed their attention. It is one of those great techniques that is much admired in any good teacher. That he would surprise them in order to gain their attention. What's he gonna say next? Was always a good thing for the student to be thinking when they engage with teacher's lesson. And so Jesus says these things. "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places where it did not have much soil, it sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow, but when the sun came up the plants were scorched and they withered because they had no roots. Other seeds grew up among the thorns which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil where it produced a crop, a hundred or sixty or thirty times what had been sown. Whoever has ears let them hear."

The listener would have been astonished at what they heard. What is the farmer doing, does he not know how expensive the seed is? How careless therefore, to allow expensive seed to fall on the path, and on rocky places, and amongst thorns, as well as on the good soil. They would be asking themselves what is the meaning behind this story? And like all good teachers, Jesus when the class is over, is not finished and he spends time explaining the parable to his closest friends, his disciples. In fact he goes on to tell them several other parables that evening, but that's for another day.

So the disciples discover that the seed is in fact the word of God. And the disciples must have then wondered about the crowd who had heard this parable, who will have taken to heart what Jesus had said? And would they grow to their full potential? How many of them would be like the seed falling on the path? Perhaps they remembered the Pharisees earlier in the day, so preoccupied with matters of the law and the observance of regulations that they failed to recognise what Jesus was doing when he healed the man with the shrivelled hand, they failed to see what was in front of their very eyes, of who Jesus was and the good news that he came to proclaim. They could not see that he was bringing healing, liberation, freedom. In fact he was the fulfilment of the law that they were so eager to preserve. And yet so it was like the word, the seed being sown on the path. The blindness, just snatching the goodness of the word away straight away and was not allowed to grow. When anyone hears a message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

We can imagine that day amongst the crowd, there were many that simply didn't get it. They didn't understand what they'd seen or heard, and that opportunity, that seed that was sown is quickly snatched away. And then there's seed that falls on the rocky ground.

There's no doubt that Jesus could tell a good story and could hold a crowd's attention. They would have marvelled at what they heard, they would have been excited and full of hope and possibilities by what they had heard. But if it did not take root then it would only last a short time. When troubles and persecutions come they quickly fall away.

There is another point in the Gospels where Jesus sees the large crowd and he has pity on them, and he describes them as being like sheep without a shepherd. Those of us who've been around the block a few times know how difficult it is to keep believing, keep trusting, and withstand the temptation to give up when things go wrong. Even now we are grateful for the support, the inspiration, and the encouragement of others to keep going even through the tough times. We need our coaches and our mentors. When they are absent it is so difficult to keep the faith and to keep trusting God and to keep trusting his word.

So you can imagine what it must have been like in Palestine. A really tough time in the history of that land where money and wealth was scarce, where it was hard to eek out a living. There must have been so many tough times, so many disappointments. How hard it must have been to have kept the faith and to trust God when life is so hard. Similarly there was seed that falls among the thorns and Jesus explanation reminds us of how delicate a precarious faith can be. The word, the seed itself is trustworthy and true, but how often it becomes entangled with all the worries and concerns of the world. This thorny world, where its tempting to turn to other forms of help, and to put our trust in false idols rather than in God. How many of us look to other things for comfort and security, like money, and wealth, and status. How many of us turn to alcohol or drugs to self-medicate, to keep strong in those difficult times. But when we put our trust in other things, when we do so the word, the promise fades away and other things take on more importance. Its like the seed that falls into the thorny ground, it is entangled, and it is smothered and the crop fails to grow.

Then of course there is the seed that falls in good soil where it is well nurtured, its watered and fed and it is able to produce a crop a hundred, or sixty or thirty times that that was sown. So what do we make of this passage? what do we make of this parable? What do we learn from this? What does it mean to us today? And could our experiences or understanding of lockdown help us develop our response to this passage. I think there are a number of things that we can learn from this passage. The first thing that comes to mind is this call to sow liberally. Yes like seed the word is precious, the word is to be valued, it is to be treasured. And yet we know that in sowing liberally the seed will land everywhere, it will land on the path, it will land on the rocky ground, it will land amongst thorns and among good soil. But I don't believe the word of God is ever wasted. And let's remember that in God's economy his word is eternal and it never runs out. There is always more with God's word. Besides in sowing liberally there may be some pleasant surprises along the way. We might actually see some extraordinary things growing in the most unexpected places.

Before lockdown and before the practise or live-streaming, our services in the evening we may have got say 30-40 people on a good day, we might add to that the 100 or so that we get in the morning, and then there might be a few dedicated people who were away that might have gone on to the website and listened to a podcast of the sermon. But the truth of the matter is we would have been reaching perhaps a hundred maybe two hundred people with our church services. Now after we've started live-streaming during lockdown, we know that from reports from Facebook that these services are reaching over five hundred people,

and sometimes considerably more than that. And this is great news. It means that the word in our attempts for preaching and in our Bible study is being spread more liberally but in all probability it also means that more is landing on the path or rocky ground or amongst thorns. But we hope that some will stick, some will land in good soil and for that we rejoice. Lockdown has been a catalyst for more seeds to be sown, and that has to be a good thing.

But what of the ground, what of the soil in lockdown? Well many of us find more time. More time to read and pray, and perhaps even to have conversations about our faith. If that is the case then that means the ground can change. And if the ground has changed for us, then it can change for others.

And so we find ourselves asking what makes for good soil? Time, patience, prayer, Bible study, fellowship, support from others. A keen gardener will always water and feed her seedlings. She will clear the ground around. She will put up netting both to protect and also to give room and space for growth.

Its important that we ask what feeds us? What nourishes us? If lockdown has been a fruitful time and has enabled us to grow spiritually then what do we carry forward? What will ensure further growth in years to come? Growth is more than simply being about faith, and being super spiritual. Its about reaching our full human potential to become the people that God wants us to be.

I think many of us have been surprised by the level of resilience we have and how resourceful we have become during lockdown. But naturally we long for greater freedom. But with greater freedom also comes a risk of contamination and more exposure to the ways of the world. What will protect us from the birds or the scorching sun or the advancing thorns. The truth is that there will always be paths and rocky ground and fields of thorns. Indeed some of my favourite flowers are the alpine plants that grow in rocky conditions in our rockeries. And for the past few years I've been delighted and surprised by these wild poppies growing out of the gap in the block paving by my front door step. They produce these large pink flowers. It is possible for some flowers to flourish in difficult situations. But here we need the expert teacher. We need the good shepherd who not only takes us to green pastures and by still waters, but he will take us by the hand and he will lead us through the darkest valley.

Where ever the seed is sown, in good times or in hardship, on paths, on rocky ground, amongst thorns or in good soil; we pray and hope that the good teacher, the greatest teacher of all, if we open our hearts and minds will enable us to grow and reach our full potential in him.

So let us pray; Heavenly Father we pray that you would give us courage to enable us to sow the seed of the good news of your kingdom in the hearts and minds of family, friends, neighbours and strangers alike. That we may be bold and extravagant in sharing our faith with others. And we pray that we may discover the right conditions for ourselves to flourish and for others to flourish. And we open our hearts and minds that the good teacher may lead us and enable us to grow to our full potential for his sake. Amen.