



Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 12 July 2020

READINGS

Genesis 25: 19-24; Psalm 119: 105-112; Romans 8: 1-11; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Seeds of Grace

How often have we heard the parable of the sower as told by Jesus? He ended the story of the farmer sowing seed with the words. He who has ears let him hear. What do we hear?

Today I hear 2 messages: one about how the seed is *sown* and the second about how it is *received*. Let's start with the second.

I think the tendency for Christians is to receive this story as a test of how well we listened in Sunday school. The seed is the word of God. We know about the birds and the path and the rocks and the weeds. Or, if we have forgotten, we can always look up the details. But we know that *our* hearts must be the 'good soil', where the seed has taken root. We have heard. We have understood – we're Christian after all. Hopefully, we're here to grow and to bear lots of fruit and that will be the point. What more do we need? I think we don't just receive God's word in one way, once off and for all time. Planting and reaping are always seasonal. Spiritual growth is too. God farms along **with** us in our hearts.

Before the word was written down, it was a message, spoken into the ears of those who would hear. God's word is not a printed Bible, with a Sunday school lesson or a Bible study quiz attached. Receiving and understanding the word of God is not a two-dimensional exercise. It is organic and experiential – like farming – because God's Word is the living Christ. The Word of God is made flesh in Jesus, revealed to us and still alive to us today. This Living Word we encounter again and again, sometimes on Sundays in the message, but more often in daily life, if we have ears to hear. Reverend Karoline Lewis, a Lutheran pastor says that the Word of God is an experience. Those who met Jesus in his ministry did not just think, 'Wow, he's got some good stuff to say.' No, somehow the words and the encounter were inseparable.

For his listeners, his words could not be understood without the experience in which they were heard. And so it is for us today. We keep coming back, not just to fertilise the good soil and water the crops, but to experience God. So we must reflect truthfully on the different ways in which God's word, Jesus the Christ, has taken hold in us. The sower was sowing seed all over, not worrying about where it would land

and how it would take hold. We all receive the same seed, but it doesn't have the same meaning for each of us. It's our ability to respond to what we hear that is key. In this time of sickness, financial strain, extreme uncertainty and fear, we cannot assume we all have ears to hear.

Our encounter with God today is not separate from our experience at home, with our families and our work and the news we see on our screens. Have you ever felt that some days God's Word is making no sense at all? The birds are picking up the words and flying away with them as soon as they land. I know that some days the Word of God is sown in my heart like seeds of hope and life, but by sunset my fears and anxiety have grown over them like weeds. Perhaps for you, circumstances and experience challenge your faith so that not every encounter with the Word bears fruit. Not every plant has a chance to take root before hardship scorches its message of peace and hope.

If the word of God is only in the very bleak words of the message that I'm speaking now, then we could be in very bad shape because farming is hard and in times of drought the crops are few. But I can't keep silent about this or ignore the reality that some days we don't have ears to hear. A preacher can't just 'dump a load of manure' in your field and hope for the best. We need to be authentic, to tell ourselves the truth about the ground of our heart and our spiritual life. In the pretending and the 'Sunday-school answers', we can lose our ability to notice when and how the seeds of God's word *have* taken hold in us and how that has shaped and anchored or rooted us.

By grace, the seeds of the word are living seeds. They are tenacious and surprising and creative. They take root in us in ways that are unexpected. And despite the pathway and the birds and the weeds and the rocks, there are *always* patches of fertile soil to receive the grace the Sower scatters. There, the fruit that grows is as unique as your experience of a dynamic, loving creator can be.

I have spoken about how the seeds of the word are received but I want to return to how they are *sown*. The sower seems to scatter them freely and with abandon – almost wastefully. He should know they won't grow on the path and on the rocks and in the weeds, and yet carelessly he lets them fall there too. This is the message of God's kingdom. It is generous. You will find it in the weeds and rocks as well as in the fertile fields. We are all made up of a complex internal landscape such as the one described in this parable. To quote theologian Bruce Epperly, 'In these days of protest and pandemic, we need to trust the Sower's bountiful planting. We need to train our eyes for divine possibilities of growth in our desperate time. We need to live hopefully, nurturing the seeds within us and around us.'

No matter which path we are travelling, the seeds of the kingdom lie along the wayside for us to notice. If we pay attention to their presence, even these seemingly wasted seeds become for us a reminder that our faith is a thing with roots. The seeds of grace are an invitation to find the fertile ground within, where God farms with us.