

## Pentecost 5 - St Aidan's – 13<sup>th</sup> July 2014

Reading: Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23 'The Parable of the Sower'

Theme: 'Many hear and many respond in a variety of ways'

Text: "He who has ears, let him hear" Matt 13:9

### Introduction

Last week I had the pleasure of listening to two interpretations and understandings of the passage from Matthew 11:25-30 where Jesus talks about 'rest for the weary' and he says "For my yoke is easy and my burden light." Matt 11:30 Robert James in our devotional time for our Intercessory Prayer service was excellent as was the Rev Dr Prof Will Storrar, our guest preacher from the USA at the 10.30am Wesley service. I took a totally different line in the sermon I preached using as my text Matthew 11: 25 "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'" My theme was 'child-like faith' and through that we see and understand Jesus' ministry mission and his words of comfort for those who struggle with the burdens of life. Why do I mention this at the start of today's sermon. Well we have one of the best known parables of Jesus for today's reading, the Parable of the Sower, but I want us to look at the various ways this may be understood, also remembering that others will find within these words their own interpretation. So let us begin to unpack some of this parable with its interpretation for us today.

### Matthew 13: 1-9 & 18-23

This passage begins with several verses about the setting. There is a large crowd around Jesus and he chooses to get into a boat by the lake so he can talk to the people and teach them, which he does in parable form. Our word parable comes from the Greek word 'parabole' which means 'a placing beside', and thus is a comparison or an illustration. Jesus uses illustrative stories often drawn from nature and human life to talk about the things from God, the faith issues in life. The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus using some 30 parables. Here it is the simple story of a farmer sowing seed on differing ground. Some on a path, some on rocky soil, some on soil with thorns or weeds and some on good soil. Naturally there are different rates of harvest from these different soils. Three quarters of the grain is lost which is a huge percentage. 75% does not have any viable uptake and is either eaten by birds, fails to take root properly and dies due to the rocky soil or takes root and is strangled out by weeds making it unproductive. Only 25% is productive which actually is planted on and in good soil and so grows to reproduce at differing rates from 100 fold down to 30 fold increases.

Is this parable about poor farming practices, the quality of the soil or the quality of the grain or about increases from a portion of what is sown in good soil? What do we actually have here?

Most commentators suggest that verses 18-23, the interpretation of the parable, belongs to early Christian tradition. However, for me, I see the interpretation as preparation for the early and later church, whether they are actually Jesus' words or not. In many ways I would like to think they are Jesus' words preparing the early Christian communities for the reality that not all will hear and believe and continue in their faith. I tend to think that Jesus speaks the parable of the Sower out of his experience as a preacher and a teacher, where most of his words fail to take root with the hearers. Rejection is a strong theme in Matthew's Gospel and this was not only Jesus'

experience but also the experience of the early church community and even the church community to this day.

There will be the different hearers of Jesus' word.

Those that have no need of it and discard it like seeds on a path.

Those that have a shallow need which when met forget about it.

Those that receive the word but then things of the world get in the way and strangle out their faith.

Finally those that hear, accept and are nurtured so their faith grows immensely.

This of course says to Jesus' followers and to the early church, that the vast majority will not accept what you have to say about your faith. You will be ridiculed, ostracized and rejected by many – expect that. However there will be the other minority that gives you hope for the future. It may not be how you expect it, but never feel defeated.

What of the actual seed that is sown. The kernel of potential and hope encased within that grain. The kernel that gave life to the birds that ate it on the path. The kernel that began to grow in unkind soils and died but added humus to that soil and hopefully enriched the future potential of that barren ground.

That kernel in some-one's life that seemed dead, but in the right or needy conditions is brought back to life.

I was amazed to read that grain found in one of the pyramids, in the tomb of a Pharaoh, some 3,500 old, was successfully germinated and grown. It had lain dormant all those years but had not been destroyed. Just possibly kernels of faith, thought to be dead, can resurrect and again find root when needed.

Sometimes when all seems lost, that is not the case for the kernel of faith begins to shoot even in unlikely conditions.

#### Story from my past

When I was a Navy Chaplain at sea I'd conduct services and sometimes you might have six people at other times 20-30 depending on the shifts, the ship you were on and what was happening. There were occasions when I wondered about the services but I faithfully conducted them. I spent seven and a half months on HMAS Sydney deployed in the Gulf of Aquiba, in the North Red Sea, outside of Jordan enforcing the UN sanctions on Iraq of materials going into that country through Jordan in 1991/2. Years later, one of the crew thanked me for those services which he said had sparked a renewal in his faith that had helped not only him but also his family after he returned from that deployment. The kernel of faith was activated, by the grace of God, and began to grow afresh in this man's life, which was a delight to hear about.

For others I have no idea, but as 'The Sower' there, hearing this positive story gave me great joy as you never know what further things will happen.

#### Reflection for today

We are reminded by Jesus "He or she who has ears, let them hear." We read into this parable a variety of interpretations, which is fine.

We have an explanation as to the fact that many will not accept Christ's word of faith but that shouldn't stop us proclaiming that faith ourselves. We also know that there will be rejection and this is part of it. However the key lesson here is 'listening to Jesus' words'. As some commentators have said, our ears are the soil of a faithful life. In the context of this parable, to find good composted dirt in our ears is indeed a good thing! It means that we are attentively tuned to the words that Jesus still speaks to us today.