

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 a 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 If you have ears,^[a] hear!"

In this morning's gospel passage, Jesus offers the hearer four images; an exposed path, rocky ground, thorny scrub land and a fertile plot of rich soil. Much ink has been spilt over the years by theologians and preachers seeking to interpret and make sense of these four images and the point that Jesus is making. A common interpretation is that the Sower is God, the seeds are the good news of Christ and the four different images represent four different scenarios in which the word of God is received. Perhaps the exposed path and the hungry birds might represent those people who hear the good news of Christ but are quickly preyed upon by counter arguments or critical voices that eat up the seed before it has ever had chance to begin to sprout. The image of the rocky ground might represent those early Christians who began a life of faith enthusiastically and passionately, however the depth or integrity of their faith was shallow, so at the first time of challenge or difficulty, they withered away. And there is the image of the thorns that grew up around the saplings, choking them to death. This could perhaps refer to the grind of life, the pains and tribulations that can afflict us all at one point or other. Or perhaps the thorns represent the competing attentions of other things or other people, taking away our attention, our energy and our resources. And then finally, there is what I presume is the ideal outcome, that the seeds fall upon good soil, and that faith if nurtured, nourished and supported, can grow and lead to much fruit. The imagery is powerful and so often the inference is that this parable is a warning to Christians and to the church; beware, do not be like those whose faith is sown on the path, the rocky ground or amidst the thorn bushes. Rather, be like the Christians who are sown on fertile ground, grow and bear much fruit.

For my money, this parable of Jesus goes beyond that of this, dare I say, over simplistic interpretation that throughout history has been used to create a kind of 'us and them' mentality; faithful Christians are the seeds that found the fertile ground, everyone else fell upon inhospitable ground and therefore can not hope to find a growing and fruitful faith.

My own view is that rather than interpret the parables of Jesus and project onto them theological or even political ideologies, the parables of Jesus interpret us. In this way, what Jesus is doing in the parable is holding up a mirror into which we might learn something about ourselves and our human nature.

When I hear the parable of the Sower, I hear Jesus speaking to me about my inner life, my inner geography, that in some way these four images of path, rocky ground, thorny scrub land and fertile soil refer to various landscapes of the human heart, landscapes that we have perhaps met in others and discovered in ourselves. We know the beaten path of life. We've stumbled through the rocky patches of life. We have been scratched and cut by the thorns of life. And we have planted our roots deep in the sacred soil of life that feeds and grows us to become a harvest. Not one, but all four images belong to each one of us.

But hang on a minute, there is one element in this parable that does not make sense. A farmer goes out and sows seed on a public pathway, on rocky ground, and amongst the thorns. That is simply wasteful, inefficient, and ineffective. It's bad farming. Why would you actively and knowingly plant seeds among the rocks and thorns or on a path and then act surprised or complain that nothing grew?

I come back to my original argument that the parable is not so much to be understood or interpreted by me, as I am to be understood and interpreted by the parable. Parables offer a different perspective, a new worldview. They give us a glimpse into God's world and what God is like. They heal our ears and our eyes so that we might hear and understand, see and perceive. Parables are not meant to test human intelligence. They are koans of grace that test our heart's willingness to surrender to and be enveloped in the always surprising generosity of God. The surprising generosity of God is exactly what the parable of the sower reveals.

As different as the four soils are they all hold two things in common. Seeds and the sower. The sower sows the same seeds in all four soils with equal toil, equal hope, and equal generosity. The sower does so without evaluation of the soil's quality or potential. There is no soil left unsown. No ground is declared undeserving of the sower's seeds. This is not about the quality of ground, it is about the quality of God, the divine sower. The human propensity is to judge ourselves or others in relation to what kind of ground they or we are. However, God simply wants to sow his life into ours, all parts of our lives, the bits we like and the parts of our lives which we might not like, the barren, the thorny or the exposed.

Seeds here. Seeds there. Seeds everywhere. Given today's economy that could just seem to be wasteful. By today's farming practices it is inefficient. With the cost of seeds and the time spent sowing it may not even be profitable. These are not, however, the sower's concerns. If we allow ourselves to be interpreted by this parable, rather than interpret it through our own concerns, then what we discover is a parable about God's faithfulness and not about farming, soil quality, or how things work in this world. In the sower's world wastefulness gives way to hope, inefficiency to love, and profitability to generosity. Every part of our lives has been sown with the seeds of God; in the economy of God every part of our lives is welcome, wanted and loved.