

Sunday 12th July 2020

Trinity 5, Proper 10, Year A

Isaiah 55:10-13; Romans 8: 1-11; Matthew 13:1-8, 19-23

Those of us who are fortunate to have gardens, may well have used some of our 'lockdown' time in recent months, clearing paths, digging out weeds, nurturing seeds and soil. If you had access to an online plant supplier you might have ordered and planted summer plants in just the right places, to give them the best chance to grow well. By contrast today, we have a parable of a sower who sows seeds with abandon, knowing not all would thrive.

Faced with the challenge of yet another sermon on this very familiar parable one time, I decided to set off on one of my 'thinking' or 'praying' walks, asking God what this has to say to us today. But as I was leaving the house, something made me stop to continue digging up an old plant. Maybe it was the Holy Spirit because what happened next is both true and extraordinary.

Not long into my digging, the men came to collect our rubbish. To my surprise, one of them stopped, told his mates he would catch them up, grabbed a spade and started digging. When I thanked him for his help, his exact words, I rushed in to write down as he left, were: "There is no need to thank me. This is the way I look at it. The world was made out of compassion – and our job is to go on sowing seeds of compassion. What sort of world would it be if we didn't sow a few seeds from time to time?"

Well ... I have no idea whether he was a Christian – but the message certainly was. This stranger had spoken God's word on my doorstep. He was right - compassion was and is at the heart of creation. The world was made through the compassionate love of God, who has never stopped loving, even though the world has too often refused to receive his word. Isaiah, just before the reading we had, promised God would restore those who turned to him because his 'steadfast love will not leave you - for the Lord has compassion on you' (Isaiah 54: 8). And Matthew says several times Jesus had compassion on those who came to hear him or seek his healing. That was the seed he was sowing.

So when Jesus described a sower in the parable, scattering seed without seeming to care for where it would land, we might take it as an image of God who sows the seeds of his word in every way possible through his servants and prophets, and then by sending his son - the living Word. He would not stop even though he knew the harvest would depend on people being willing to receive him.

Matthew tells us the crowds listening to Jesus were so great, that he got into a boat so he could speak to all who were gathered on the shore. It seems many were hungry for the word, but we cannot know how many understood and took the word to heart. But Jesus sowed it nonetheless by both word and deed. Even the disciples were puzzled about its meaning and asked Jesus to explain. His explanation shifted focus from the action of the sower to what happens to the seeds: those falling on dry paths, poor soil and rocky places, meant harvests that would struggle, wither and die. But seeds falling on well prepared soil would go on to yield good crops. The teaching of God's word was like the sowing of seeds he said, and the heart to receive the word was like those different soils.

That suggests we must each ask the question of ourselves, 'What type of soil am I for receiving the word of God?' Am I like the pathway, dry and hard - not even willing to listen and receive, so the seed cannot even sprout? Or like the rocky or thorny ground where the seed sprouts but does not have a lasting impact or is suffocated by the distractions of worldly interests. Or maybe we are like the good soil that has potential to bear much fruit. Perhaps if we are honest there are times when all these conditions apply to us.

But simply comparing ourselves to different types of soil has one crucial limitation. Unless we do something to nurture it, soil is what it is - it does not change, except perhaps in negative ways as it erodes or loses its fertility. So the question that follows is: 'How can I improve the character of my heart so that the word of God can bear fruit in my life or bear fruit more abundantly?'

Perhaps Jesus was using this parable to ask his hearers to reflect on where we are in our understanding and faith journey, to go on preparing our hearts and lives so that God's word for each of us can take root, grow and flourish. It challenges us to go on renewing our hearts and lives through prayer, through study of God's word, in sharing with each other in worship and in service, and listening out for God's word for each of us. Well prepared soil does not happen unless we work at it. It is the same with our lives of faith and trust in God. We all need to tend the seeds of faith that are sown in us and we all can help nurture those seeds of faith in others and so find that we in turn become the sowers.

That is what my unexpected helper helped me to see. The world was made out of compassion – but it is our job to go on sowing those seeds of compassion, spreading the word, and putting it into action in the way we live our lives - the Spirit dwelling within us as Paul puts it – so that others may opportunity to receive, hear and come to believe.

And the hard part is that we must do that without judgment or limit. Just as Jesus lived his life in much the same way as the sower sowed the seed - not selecting only the most influential people talk to or healing only those who would be of use to him in the future. He lived and loved without discrimination. He could see in the rocky places a need for God's word and love. He went about really listening to the inner needs of people, took action, longing for everyone to know the healing and wholeness he came to bring.

But like Jesus, we may find our sowing of seeds of his word, his kingdom, falls on stony ground. We may be accepted and then discarded when things get difficult, we may find it hard to make ourselves heard above the noise and distractions of the world. But there will also be the receptive hearts, the good places, where the seeds of love develop and grow into part of a great harvest for God. We cannot control or demand specific responses either to ourselves or the message we pass on. But every simple task we do in God's name provides an opportunity to spread the word, help someone to come to know God, give encouragement, hope, or welcome to another along the way.

And like seeds growing it may take time. We may never know the long-term effect we have on people through our words and actions. But we can trust that God will be working through us and sometimes even after we've moved on. As God promises through Isaiah: (my word) "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose".

So hear the words of a familiar parable through the compassionate action and words of a stranger, nurture them in your heart and in your living. God's love is everlasting, but he needs you to go on sowing the seeds of his love where you are for the sake of his kingdom. "What sort of world would it be if we didn't sow a few seeds from time to time?"