

Trinity 5 A

Gardener's World.

This is a sermon for all those fans of Gardener's World, or perhaps better, Farming Today. We have an agricultural context for both the O.T. and Gospel readings. It's all about growing. The familiar parable of the sower takes its cue from Isaiah, who uses a similar image to illustrate the effect of the Word of God - like the seed which the sower plants, watered by the rain and the snow which come down from heaven, to promote its growth and fulfillment.

So in the parable of the sower we have the seed falling on different types of soil, paralleling the affect of God's word in people's hearts and lives. Interestingly there are over 50 parables in the first three gospels, but none in the gospel of John. But this parable of the sower is virtually unique in that a direct explanation of the meaning of the parable is given. Commentators say it is doubtful whether this explanation was actually given by Jesus, but that it is the gospel writers' addition. The whole point of parables as little stories is to illustrate, to be open to interpretation and applicable in different ways, so this direct interpretation may seem unhelpfully specific.

What is far more interesting are the verses which our compilers of the lectionary missed out. Between the parable and its interpretation are some very difficult verses where, in answer to the disciples' question: 'Why do you speak in parables?' Jesus quotes from Isaiah: So that seeing they may not perceive, and hearing they do

not listen or understand'. It seems to be saying the complete opposite of what we might think parables are for. Do they make things clear, or more obscure? In Mark's gospel it is even more explicit that Jesus seems to be using parables to hide and keep secret the true meaning. In this is great subtlety. For part of the power of stories, be they miniature parables or full length novels, is the ability of story to reach places, and make connections which are different for everybody. The power of story is beyond rational explanation, and can often reveal not solution or resolution, but even deeper questions and mystery. Hence the inappropriateness of the direct explanation in this case of the parable of the sower.

In this case part of that mystery is the miracle of growth. How and where does that happen? In the case of the seed it happens underground, in the deep dark earth. There it has to be left for the work to happen. For me one of the joys of ministry over the years is to see children growing up, sometimes from babies I have baptised into strapping young people off to university. It has been lovely to see that in our children here over the years - and it is something of a miracle to see that happen, often seemingly all too quickly.

For each of us, whatever age we are, there is the challenge of keeping on growing, not necessarily physically, but spiritually, in depth and understanding. There are many churches, and we are encouraged by our diocese here, where the phrase 'growing disciples' is currently used. How do you grow a disciple - it sounds a bit forced and unnatural to me. But in the depths of our souls and spirits the can be an ongoing sense of moving on, growing in the faith, and I guess that is what is meant.

So our concern, and what we might learn from this parable, is how to create the good soil where that growth may happen. I have singularly failed over the years to grow anything in one particular part of my garden. I have weeded it often, and spent a small fortune at one stage on lavender bushes - which subsequently all died. What is the problem? Basically the soil is gravel and stones. I haven't taken care to create the good soil in which things might grow well. It's the seed that fell on the rocky ground in the parable. The good soil in terms of faith is surely that which is full of love, of openness to share, of willingness to learn from others and from God. In that good soil the seeds of faith will continue to thrive and flourish and bear fruit. But that all happens in the hidden place, underground, in the depths of our souls.

All this resonates well with a favourite prayer of mine by Jim Cotter, who wrote many striking and meaningful prayers and liturgies. It is a prayer for our inward growth and fulfillment:

Give me a candle of the Spirit, O God, as I go down into the deeps of my being. Show me the hidden things, the creatures of my dreams, the storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts. Take me down to the spring of my life, and tell me my nature and my name. Give me freedom to grow; so that I may become that self, the seed of which you planted in me at my making. Amen.