

Scripture Reading for July 12 2020

Isaiah 50:1-2,6-11 (NIV)

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NIV)

¹³ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

¹⁸ “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Sermon: Listen, Understand, Grow, and Persevere

One of the most memorable things about the teachings of Jesus is his *parables*; he was a master story teller. Nevertheless, his parables were often cryptic and his audience, though fascinated, didn't always understand what the story was about. Oddly enough, we are told Jesus did that deliberately¹ and that seems a strange way to impart information. One wonders what educationalists would think of that technique today! His parables were set in everyday life and in that sense the story was readily appreciated, but it requires some discernment to discover what wisdom is hidden within it.

Today's parable goes down in history as "The Parable of the *Sower*,"² which makes you think the story is all about the *farmer*. However, if you think more about it, the sower and the seed are the *constants* in the story and so one wonders if it would have been better named, "The Parable of the *Soils*."³ In light of that observation, what I think is needed - before we start - is to zoom back and recognize this whole chapter is a discourse on parables.⁴ And through them Jesus explains what it *means* to be a disciple and to help them - and us - discern *how* the kingdom of God is established. In the two previous chapters, Matthew describes how Jesus' ministry has faced opposition - even failure. And one of the pressing questions for his followers - *and* for Matthew's readers - was: "Why is it that good news that "God's kingdom is at hand"⁵ is *not* received enthusiastically by Jews?" You would think that religious people would be *excited* that a prophet⁶ is present among them. It seems, however, that the more devout the person, the more vehemently they reject Jesus and his message. Christians often ask the same kind of question today: why is it that despite the all the preaching and teaching of ministers, the message seems to fall on deaf ears and congregations are not growing in numbers. Moreover, some people start off following Jesus, but they seem to drift away for some reason; why is that? That was a common enough experience then, as it is today. This first parable - whatever we should call it - seems to be a response to those troubling questions. Let's hear what Jesus has to say.

The farmer scatters his seed both diligently and generously.⁷ It is no discredit to the farmer that certain things then happen to the seed, such as some being eaten by birds. And the fact that some seed falls on the path is not due to the carelessness of the farmer; after all, this is bound to happen when the sower sows near the edges of the field. Moreover, the farmer does not know in advance that there are rocks under the soil in certain places, nor does he know that seeds of weeds are dormant in the some parts of the field.⁸ On one level, then, there is nothing profound here - this image of a farmer sowing

¹ See Matt 13:10-17.

² Due to Matt 13:18,37. Matthew identifies the sower with Jesus and so we need to appreciate the story *Christologically*.

³ See Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13 - 20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15.

⁴ It is one of Matthew's "five books" (Matt 5-7; 10; 13; 18; and 23-25), perhaps mirroring the 5 books of Moses.

⁵ See Matt 3:2; 4:17 and Mark 1:15.

⁶ Naturally, I believe was the Messiah! But, *minimally*, Jesus was a prophet (like John the Baptist).

⁷ In 1st century Palestine, seed would be sown in the Fall or Spring. Sometimes the seed was sown first and then plowed in, and at other times the soil was first plowed. The parable is *not* interested in the agricultural details, so there's no reference to the concerns the farmer - such as the weather. All attention focuses on the fate of the seed in the various kinds of soil.

⁸ See also Matt 13:24-30.

seed was culturally very familiar; Jesus is *not* teaching them better farming methods! As everyone knew, the Sower simply scatters the seed and then waits to see what happens.

There are two broad categories of soil in this story; *productive* and *unproductive*. The former is referred to as “good soil,” *not* in a moral sense, but simply in terms of its productivity; after all, you plant seeds to achieve a *harvest*! The story then describes *three* kinds of unproductive soils: first, a hard path; second, one with soil covering submerged rocks and, third, soil mixed with the seeds of thorny weeds that would grow to dominate and choke the good seed.⁹ The productive soil also gives a *variety* of yields – it is *not* uniformly good! The quantities mentioned are 100, 60, and a 30-fold increase per seed planted. Again, there is nothing miraculous here, it simply *affirms* that despite some disappointment, there *will* be a harvest and, in some places, spectacularly so.¹⁰ Jesus concludes, as he often did, with “Let anyone with ears, listen.”¹¹ This line is significant as it flags up to the audience that within this most ordinary of stories there is hidden wisdom to be discerned.

Curiously, after a somewhat confusing conversation between Jesus and the disciples as to *why* he spoke in parables,¹² we hear an explanation as to its meaning. Many scholars see Matthew’s description to be addressed to *his readers*, in other words, this part is likely an adaptation of Jesus’ original words.¹³ If this is indeed the case, it helps create a bridge for us today, as the problems Matthew’s community faced are not dissimilar from our own.

The Sower is *not* explicitly identified with Jesus here¹⁴ and in light of the Great Commission at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel,¹⁵ the sower could therefore be an apostle. It could also be a future missionary, it can be me, it can be you; whenever *anyone* communicates the love of God, they are sowing a seed. The seed is identified by Matthew as “the word about the kingdom”¹⁶ – in other words, the revolutionary message that God is here and is establishing his reign of mercy and forgiveness to all to will hear *and* respond. But some will not *understand* it because their hearts are hard, like the seed that falls on the path. Cynicism and dismissal are also a common reaction today. Matthew, like Mark and Luke, describe this lack of comprehension in terms of “the evil one” snatching the seed away before it has a chance to germinate. This broadens the scope of rejection to *not* merely human free will, though

⁹ This does *not* mean 75% of the field gives a poor yield!

¹⁰ In the past, scholars have thought 10x yield was typical and so 100x is miraculous. Modern scholarship questions that interpretation/assumption. The abundance of the harvest is not thought to be the key point, rather the *fact* of a harvest – despite much rejection. See also Gen 26:12.

¹¹ Matt 13:9.

¹² See Matt 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9-10; 10:23-24.

¹³ Compare carefully Matt 13:18–23, Mark 4:13 – 20, and Luke 8:11–15 and one can see some justification for this theory. (Briefly, Matthew replaces Mark’s collective nouns to singular, thus emphasizing individual responsibility.)

¹⁴ The Sower was often a metaphor for God and, in a related parable, the Sower is the “Son of Man,” Matt 13:37.

¹⁵ See Matt 28:18-20.

¹⁶ Mark 4:14 – “the word”; Luke 8:11 – “the word of God.”

that – of course – is important, but to a cosmic battle between good and evil, and the evil is still resisting the coming of God’s reign.¹⁷ I’ll be taking more about that in next week’s parable.

Matthew then explains that the soil containing submerged rocks is like a person who *hears* and *responds* with joy. They therefore *do* initially understand, however, when the hardships of suffering arise, including the kind that is as a direct result of following Jesus, they simply fall away. You sense this description will resonate with some of Matthew’s original readers. And, today, one of the most common reasons for rejecting the Christian faith is the “problem of suffering.” And that rejection is not merely by agnostics, but from Christians who feel that God has let them down. Many Christians think that God will protect them from any tragedy befalling them, which can reduce God to good-luck charm. But serious illness, tragic accidents, job loss, divorce, aging, etc. happens to those who follow Jesus too! It is not that the Christian’s initial commitment wasn’t genuine; rather, Matthew says it is because their *root system* is too shallow to sustain the plant through the hardships of life – the hidden rocks of suffering stunts spiritual growth.

I think this is far more common than we care to admit. One reason people leave the Church because they’re disappointed with God. If – as I said earlier – Jesus is explaining what it *means* to be a disciple through parables such as this, what, then, is the take-home lesson here? A person’s initial joy and understanding at hearing the message of Jesus is great, but *not* enough to sustain them for the long marathon of the Christian life. We need to *grow up* by sending our roots deep *down*. Then *when* the droughts of suffering arise, as they invariably will do, our roots can still be sustained by the waters of life.¹⁸ Discipleship involves *discipline*. And if you think about disciple in any endeavour, it involves *routine*. The St Andrew’s Keep-Fit Group meets 3 times a week. As my wife keeps telling me, a mild workout from time to time is *not* going to do anything; my guess is that George workouts daily! In the same way, an artist sketches and paints regularly – every day – to hone their skills. A writer writes, even if it’s just a page per day. An academic reads, reflects, and researches. Not everything one draws, scribbles, or studies will have an obvious, immediate benefit or outcome; but they develop discipline. Spiritual disciplines are equally important to cultivate. *Converse* with God daily and tell him what’s on your heart; be open to God responding through the words of another, or through a relevant thought that seems to come from nowhere. *Study* the Bible and stimulate root growth by learning from other Christian authors. Take time to *reflect* on spiritual things; *recognize* God’s presence in surprising places and people. Deliberately include God in your decision-making - indeed in all you do. Add to these spiritual disciplines: confession, worship, fellowship, rest, fasting, celebration, service, generosity, purity, and witness – in other words, sowing seed, and – as a result - a person’s root system will grow deep as part of a Christian *community*. Being a disciple is more than orthodox *thinking* [or theology], it also involves right *practice* [or ortho-praxis.]

¹⁷ Matthew expands on this in Matt 13:24-30; 36-43. There is therefore an *eschatological* harvest to consider here.

¹⁸ Emotionalism, sentimentality, and superficiality harms any discipline – Christians beware!

Matthew then goes on to describe the unproductive soil that also contains thorns, which were common weeds that could grow up to 6-feet high and suck out all the energy from the soil, and so the seedling produced nothing. He allegorizes this scenario as “the person who hears the word, but *worldly cares* and the *seductiveness of wealth* choke the Christian message resulting in ineffectiveness. This is self-explanatory and most relevant for us in the West today. Our attraction to money, independence, status and security can be a quest for self-reliance that excludes *God’s* provision and the broader welfare of a Christian community. Worry and anxiety, though normal emotions, need to be moderated by trust *in* God. Excessive attention to worldly matters is distracting to the disciple and results in lack of fruit.

Yet despite the various kinds of unproductive soil, Matthew assures his readers – and us - there *will* be a harvest, because *God is faithful*. Although people in Jesus’ and Matthew’s day rejected the message, the purpose of God, namely, the full realization of his kingdom is certain to be fulfilled. And we are here 2000 years later because God’s Spirit is still at work in every generation. Even so, the line between sowing the word and reaping the kingdom harvest is not straight or without its problems.¹⁹

Where do we fit into this picture? First, regardless of any rejection and failure – and we are bound to experience some that from time to time - we are to *keep on* sowing, recognizing the seed is vulnerable, growth is slow, and success in *each* seed is not guaranteed. Even so, and as I just stated, we can be totally confident *God* will bring about his final harvest. Hear again the words of Isaiah, our Old Testament reading:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it *yields seed for the sower* and bread for the eater, so is *my word that goes out* from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”²⁰ The word of God is powerful and effective.

And, second, we need to be intentional in our spiritual journey. And that involves *listening, understanding, growing* and *perseverance*. All four aspects include both insight *and* deliberation action. Discipleship requires discipline; let’s hone our own spiritual practices. And yes, we *will* face troubles from *without* – the sufferings of life – and from *within* – the temptations and worries of this world. From Matthew’s perspective, it’s *how* we respond to those challenges that will determine whether or not we fall away or are productive and so part of God’s final harvest. We have a choice to make – and to *keep on* making – as individuals and as a faith community. Anyone with ears to hear, listen, understand, grow, and persevere. Amen.

¹⁹ We can’t speed up the eschatological harvest by what we do; that is in God’s timing.

²⁰ Isa 55:10-11.