

Holy Communion 16 July 2017

Mt 13:1-9, 18-23 & Rom 8:1-11

Jesus was a master of strategy. He made His centre of teaching a place called Capernaum. A Northern town with a tendency towards rebellion it was a place a preacher could be heard. It was a nodal point, a stop on the Roman transport system so that news from Capernaum could travel fast across the Roman Empire.

Based there Jesus goes out to teach his disciples and the crowds that follow Him. He does so by going to the shores of Lake Galilee and enabling his hearers to gather on the beaches while he sits in a boat a little out on the lake and uses a natural amphitheatre so that with hardly any extra effort his words can be heard clearly by hundreds of people at once.

And of course, all of these people whether disciples or not would have been part of an agricultural community. They knew how farming worked, how terrifying a bad yield might be and how precious seed was.

So how odd, that Jesus, this strategic master, communicating with ease with the greatest number of people possible in the place most likely to gossip his stories around the known world, should tell a story about such a lame farmer. No wonder the disciples were confused. In fact, the disciples are so stumped by it that they beg Jesus to explain it and unusually he does. But Jesus doesn't give them a full point-by-point explanation. He gives them a kind of map or a key. A hint, in crossword terms, to help them avoid classic dead ends.

Jesus taught in parables partly because they were memorable and partly because they require us to do some work. We think about ourselves and God and our neighbours in different roles in each story and that provides us with different challenges that help us to work out our life with God. Ours is always an active choice to respond to the love of God that is shown in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Working through a parable, as the first disciples did is an important part of that.

So lets pray for the help of the Holy Spirit as we look at this famous story together.

PRAY

This parable comes at the centre of Matthew's gospel and it is the first of series of parables that Jesus tells about the Kingdom of God. This is the breaking in of God into the world with justice and love.

And the thing that is becoming clear is that all the time Jesus is around, the breaking in is happening. It happens through Jesus. But almost every day with every encounter Jesus seems to upend the perceived wisdom about the Kingdom and surprise people with the lavish and universal invitation of God to join in. Jews, of course but also the unclean, and the previously shut out. That is children, women, the disable, the mentally ill, the sick, foreigners and every version of those as well.

As we focus in on the parable, we see there are 3 parts to the story: the seed, the sower and the soil.

The seed first.

1. The seed – is the good news of the coming Kingdom of God. The seed is the very idea that God is king and

that God is establishing His rule here and now. Jesus is doing it and preaching it. The seed is the message of God's love in Jesus Christ.

2. The Sower:

The sower is in many ways a terrible farmer. Who goes around flinging seed so recklessly that some lands on the path? Which farmer leaves great rocky patches in her field that might damage tools and would certainly not help the growth of the crop? Who sows seed so close to the edge of the field that they go into the thorns where life is unlikely at best?

The crowd might be laughing along with Jesus, but maybe a look or a change of tone suddenly make them think...

...Could this sower be God? So full of love, so full of resource, so unending and never giving up that the seed, the word of God, is flung further than we can imagine to the places we would write-off? In other words God's strategy is not like ours because there is no running out with God. No famine of love. No limit on the gospel.

Or could this sower be us, the disciples of Jesus Christ? After all we are the ones charged with spreading the word, sowing the seed of the good news of Jesus to our friends and family? Could it be that we are to consider the preparation of the soil before we sow? How would a child in an abusive family hear only talk of the gospel? How would a person on a benefits sanction going without food in order to give enough to his children hear the mere discourse of Jesus?

Are we not, as good farmers, to prepare the ground as Compassion, Home for Good and Foodbank all do? As good sowers, are we not to serve our communities and seek the welfare of the city so that the conditions for the seed are favourable for the planting?

Sickness, poverty and addiction all conspire to prevent the uptake of the gospel. So too can excessive wealth, greed, and worldliness. So ours, as good farmers is to carefully prepare the soil. And one of the ways to do this is to pray.

Prayer prepares the ground. We all need help with prayer because it is hard work, just like removing rocks from the ground. Sometimes we need to do it alone and sometimes

we need the company of others to help us. Every week in church we do the work of prayer in our intercessions, but there are other opportunities too with on-line groups, in our study groups when we meet and on Friday mornings as we walk the patch with ears attentive to our community and to God, seeking to prepare the soil.

The other aspect of preparation is in our church life. St Michael's needs to be a safe church so that we can share the good news of the Kingdom of God in our community.

We need to ensure that the relevant people have DBS checks so we can be responsible in the care of vulnerable adults – through our work with older people, and children.

We need to invest time and money in our building so that this is a safe and welcoming place in which to invite people. This week we hosted the Bolingbroke Academy's summer concert and it was incredible. They were full of talent, and teamwork and joy, and I cannot wait to invite them back. But the building needs to be made safe with emergency lighting, better locks and a number of works to ensure we are safer from fire than we currently are.

And financially, ministry takes money. We will need to keep giving and or to give afresh to prepare the soil well for the mission ahead. We need to ensure we have a clear budget and clear goals so we know when we have got rid of the rocks and improved the top soil ready for planting.

In fact our phase of mission here at St Michael's might well be called "Preparing the ground."

Lets look now at the ground, the soil types.

1. The soils.

The soils, in Jesus' key, are the ways in which people react to hearing the word of God.

The path soil – the word is snatched away through a lack of understanding combined with a malicious enemy. That reinforces why prayer is so important. The struggle for the people to come to respond to the love of God is a struggle against but spiritual forces that will not give up easily.

The rocky soil – are fair weather Christians without the commitment to stay the course when the going gets tough.

The thorny soil – is where faith is choked out by worldly cares and the lure of wealth.

The good soil – is where we hear, understand and the big difference is, bear fruit. The good soil is the only fruit-bearing soil in the story. That is the measure of the soil and so the measure of discipleship. The amount of fruit is less important. Almost arbitrary. But the evidence of more seed to spread in more fields is the evidence of discipleship.

We are called to be both sower and soil. To be fruitful and active in sharing the good news. We are God's plan A for saving the world!

Which is why it is great to remember Rom 8:1:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! Hallelujah! We are set free. God knows whom He is dealing with when he deals with us, and that is very

reassuring. We are imperfect and forgiven people. But amazingly God wants us to work with Him.

So we must take it seriously. And because Jesus' parables give us a chance to think discuss and pray through challenging themes, here are five ideas to chew over:

1. The seed is an amazing gift.! Nothing is good like the good news that Jesus has set us free from our selfishness that leads to isolation and death. It is worth giving thanks for hourly and giving away daily.
2. God is more generous than we are, so to be like God we need to sow outside of the lines.
3. Jesus is more strategic than we are, so to be like Jesus we need to prepare the ground through hours of prayer and acts of mercy and justice.
4. We can reflect on what kind of soil we are, and we have the capacity to choose and even to change.

5. The measure is not hearing or understanding but bearing fruit. Some will bear loads some a little – that is a bit of a mystery, to stop us getting jealous or proud, but good soil will bear fruit. And fruit means more seed being sown into more soils by more sowers.

Amen.