

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15 Year A 2020

Just before the first 'lock down' at the end of Lent in March, we had our parish quiet day at the Campion Centre in Kew. One of the upper-floor common rooms overlooked some neighbouring backyards. In one these gardens, over the course of the quiet day, I noticed a family setting up a new vegetable garden. They had a number of foam, polystyrene boxes, filled them with soil and put in their vege seedlings. At the start of the first lockdown all those months ago, there wasn't just a mad rush for toilet paper, pasta and canned goods. There was also a kind of 'panic buying' for seedlings! Nurseries reported a complete emptying of their stock of herbs and vegetable seedlings as people rushed to plant out new gardens. Many, I imagine, for the first time. I rather like that idea that over the last few months there have been people in back yards and courtyards and balconies all over the city discovering the joys (and challenges!) of gardening for the first time. Because, of course, there are challenges. Mostly, you can't just stick something in the ground and expect it to flourish. There are successes and failures in gardening. And oftentimes a lot of trial and error.

It is the challenges of getting things to grow as we would like them that is the central motif of the parable in today's Gospel. It is one of the things that makes the stories of Jesus so accessible and relatable: they are drawn from real life. The people of Jesus' day would have immediately understood the point being made. And even in a highly urbanised society as ours, it remains accessible. Perhaps for many people now even *more* relatable. *How come that isn't growing? Well, have you watered it? Does it get any sun? There are no nutrients in your soil! That's not a vege! That's a weed...* Putting something in the ground is no guarantee that it will flourish. Implant the seed of faith into the earth of our hearts, there is no guarantee anything will come of it.

Perhaps most striking in today's gospel parable is the way the sower scatters the seed in quite a casual fashion. Not carefully placing his seeds; no scientific method employed. In the world of ancient Judea, this was how seed was sown. Quite a bit of it could land in the three situations described: on a path, on rocky soil, amongst thorns. But in this the parable really speaks of something of the generosity of God. There is a kind of waste involved. Maybe we could call it a holy waste. But this holy waste is more than compensated by that which falls on good soil. In some instances, producing thirtyfold, impressive enough. Another sixty, a rich blessing indeed! And for others still hundredfold, an incredible superabundance!

The parable, then, speaks to something about how we should go about our task of sharing the living Word. Not in withdrawal or isolation. Not calculating the imagined productivity of our efforts. Not approaching our efforts within suffocating constraints. We go about our task knowing there will be some risk. There will be some failure. There will be some false starts and plenty of disappointments. But amongst all that there will, by God's good grace, fruitfulness, abundance. The parable surely reflects the actual experience of the mixed responses to Jesus' preaching: not every human heart that heard him accepted him. We can sense the discouragement the disciples felt that so many of his efforts seemed wasted, without lasting effect. But like the sower, Jesus continues to throw the word about widely because of his confidence that when it does strike home, the harvest is so great as to more than compensate for all the other losses.

We know - and all too painfully for some - of the immense care and effort with which the seed of faith has been implanted in the hearts of family members and loved ones. And for it to appear to do nothing, for it to apparently wither and die. I know this is a sadness for many of you, because you tell me! There is sadness about what happened to your own children or siblings. You ask, *what about the dozens of kids that used to attend Sunday School a half century ago? What happened to all the lads that used to sing in the choir? Where are all the couples that have been married here? Where are all the kids – tens of thousands of them in this city – who attend Anglican schools?* So much time and effort. So many programs, initiatives, so much money. So much waste... In a great many hearts - even amongst those we know and love - the seed of faith suffers the fate of that which fell on the path, the rocky soil or amongst thorns.

But in all this sadness, failure and disappointment we need to hold to that central image of the gospel: that when the seed of faith finds a receptive heart and truly strikes home, the way is set for an incredible fullness, an abundance of life! And the parable makes it quite clear: for Jesus, it is the *human heart* to which the good news of the kingdom is announced. It is within the human heart in which the struggle to obtain ascendancy over the rule of Satan begins. (How quickly and easily that seed can be snatched away, the gospel reminds us.) But also, from the human heart that it takes root, bursts into life, and so become a sign of God's kingdom - God rule - at work in us. It is from the heart that the abundance of God's life truly shows itself. So, really, we shouldn't expect too much from church schools, or courses, or books or other programs. They have very limited capacity to speak to touch and shape the heart.

But we have to be a little careful in this. The point of the sower's casual, wild technique is *not* waste. The seed is not scattered with abandon and generosity for the purpose of falling on paths or on stone or amongst thorns. These are the unhappy, unfortunate outcomes. If inevitable, still not the purpose. The purpose is fruitfulness. The purpose is submission to the rule of God so to enjoy life – abundance - in him. Now, it's quite common to hear in some church circles, *well, at least the seed was sown*, as if that was enough! It is perhaps one of the greatest cop-outs in the church! The point is not the planting. The point is the growing.

And this - growth in faith - we cannot take for granted. It doesn't just happen. It doesn't occur by accident. We need to *cooperate* with God's grace. We need to put things in place to both protect and nurture what has been given us. For us in our situation now, surely the issue of seed amongst thorns is what we must be most vigilant about. Yes, there are troubles, stresses, anxieties that surround us all at present. So, we must take extra care that these don't swamp us, overwhelm us. Indeed, in the language of the gospel 'choke' us. Now, the usual things we rely on to nurture and sustain our faith are removed from us. Once more, we do not have the opportunity to share in the sacraments. We are still unable to enjoy each other's company. We cannot benefit from most of our programs and activities. So, the nutrients, the care, that normally support us, help us grow in faith are absent. There is real risk in this for us. If we just say, *we can keep our heads down and we'll jump right back in where left off*, we delude ourselves. This is a time of test of us. And the test is that we take personal responsibility. It is all too common in the life of the church to think that others are responsible for the state of our spiritual life. But with all the usual props and supports gone, more is being called out of us.

So, come afresh to the rich resources of the church. Discover the wealth of Scripture and of the daily office. Look once more at the re-ordering and restructuring of your day to allow for prayer and silence and study. There is no one looking over your shoulder to check. No one else at this time who can tend the soil, water, weed. Don't let this time be a wasteland. Don't let your hearts become impoverished. Don't let the seed of faith shrivel and die. Don't let it be snatched away! And don't let it be choked by worldly care and anxiety. In a strange way embrace this test. Because this may yet be a time of grace. In your own heart you possess the greatest treasure on earth! So, do what is needed to support, nurture and cultivate the seed of faith. Amen.