

Holders and Bearers of God's Word A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen: A sower went out to sow.'
Matthew 13:2

So how did a carpenter's son get to know so much about farming? Maybe he just slipped out of his father's shop long enough to learn the ways of the land. Even as a boy Jesus might have brushed the sawdust off his sleeve and taken long walks in the country. All the gospels show him to be a keen observer of nature, of times and seasons, and of the labor of those whose lives depend on the fruits of the earth, on the fate of seeds.

Jesus seems to have understood what every farmer throughout history has long known that things don't always grow where and when and how you want them to. You toss the seed this way and that; you spread it as far as your aching arms can reach. And still you can't be sure if it will take root or not. You can't know how or if the soil will receive it. Every morning is a new and weary hope, every night a desperate prayer.

So, it's with this kind of understanding, this sympathetic knowledge, that Jesus tells one of his most famous parables, the parable of the sower. I must confess, that as a preacher, not to mention a believer, I've struggled with this familiar story for some while. Perhaps you have too. And I've tried to look at it from different angles. Too often, though, I think I've seen it simply as a lesson in acceptance, with the burden of judgment falling finally on those who reject God's saving word. Perhaps I've found myself too often reflected in their fatal choices. It's always seemed to me a hard and shaming lesson.

Not so much now, though. Maybe it's that I've come to see at last come to be reminded at last (and it's about time!) of God's improbable, ridiculous, unbending, eternal love, a love we will never get our heads around, a love that makes no sense, yet one that is daily revealed and mediated in Christ. Jesus' parable shows him to be a close observer of earthly nature; it also shows him to be a keen observer of human nature, and of human life with all its temptations and excuses, all its self-deceits. Most of all, though, it shows him to be a close observer of God's nature.

Far from an indictment, Jesus' teaching echoes with compassion, with feeling borne out of the sad awareness that (in mind of St. Paul) we do the things we do not want to do; we turn our backs on that which we know will save us. We reject the seed of new birth more often out of fear or shallowness or lack of courage than out of willful choice. I'm probably going way too easy on my fellow humans! Yet Jesus knows we don't get up in the morning planning to thwart his every move! We don't get up thinking we'll go out and kick his seed into the ditch! His parable speaks as much about the heady joys of first believing as it does about the painful loss of those joys. It laments our lack of understanding of what we've been gifted as much as it decries our turning the gift away. As in so many of his parables, it hints at what might have been. There's a kind of divine melancholy running through this ancient tale. No one longs for us to love God and turn to God and remain with God more than God.

Still, sad, or not, the parable of the sower reminds us that just receiving God's word and spirit is not enough, that high hopes and good intentions alone are not sufficient to live and bear Christ's life in the world. It tells us we're in this for the long haul, for the duration. So, we are to hear the word, as Jesus explains; we are to seek to understand it, as well as explain it to others. But then we are to become ourselves the sowers, by virtue of Christ's power working in us. There's the

whole rest of God's planting season ahead. By our words and actions, by what we teach and what we embody, by what we claim as true and whom we serve in love these are the things that grow the seed and bear the fruit and make it yield a hundredfold, or sixty, or thirty, however large or small that harvest turns out to be.

I know, dear friends, how strange and lonely and barren it might seem now along that seed path. I feel with you the weight of all these passing days. We may not fear rejecting the word of God so much as not remembering what exactly it sounds like through the silence, let alone know how to spread it across our land. And as for the harvest of Christ's redemption, in which he desires all the earth to share we may have resigned ourselves to wait indefinitely for that, or at least until this painful, uncertain time is past, until whatever we think is normal resumes.

And yet you and I know, even without God telling us, even without sacks-full of seeds falling on top of our heads, that we cannot wait to be sowers any longer. We cannot wait for justice to grow itself. We cannot wait for mercy and compassion and healing to take root again where they have lain fallow. We cannot look to some distant harvest when the fruits of that harvest are sought and hungered for right now. In our private lives and in our public witness, and though at times robbed of joy and choked by thorns, we remain both the good soil and the sower. We are the holder and the bearer of the word. And the sun is already high, and the wide field beckons, and the seed is warm in our hands, and the Son of the Most High God is, as ever, walking beside us. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +