

16th July 2023 – Morning Service

The Parable of the Sower

Rev Andrew Roberts

Prayers and other material adapted from ROOTs for Worship

Prayer of Approach

As we come before you, Lord God, we prepare ourselves to receive your Word. May we be fertile soil for you, the mighty sower, ever casting seed where it might take root. We seek to rid our souls of stones and thorns and all that hinders or chokes growth; may we dig deep, and be open and nurturing to receive your message to us today. **Amen**

StF 8 – God with us: Creator, Father

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| 1) God with us: Creator, Father,
Bringing everything to birth;
Mother of the whole creation,
Fire of stars and life of earth:
Down the countless years composing,
From the earth's evolving night,
Love's response to love, and forming
Mind and soul to seek your light. | 3) God with us: Unwearied Spirit,
From the birth of time and space,
Surging through unconscious being,
Joyful, Life-Creating Grace:
Through the centuries you find us;
You, as God, inspire our prayer;
Life and Power at work within us,
Love for ever, everywhere! |
| 2) God with us: Redeemer, Brother,
Friend for ever at our side,
Here, in flesh, you walked among us,
Taking up your cross, you died.
Crucified, despised, rejected,
Perfect Love, who shared our shame,
Streaming from the cross, your judgement,
Full of mercy, clears our name. | 4) God, Transcendent, far beyond us,
Closest Friend, unfailing Guide:
Through the ages, wronged, affronted,
In your poor, still crucified!
God with us: convict, forgive us;
By your holy love destroy
All that hinders peace and justice:
Fill this aching world with joy! |

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Prayer of Adoration

Heavenly Father, mighty sower, good gardener, life-giving, constant in creation,
we worship and adore you.

Lord Jesus, face of the Father, casting wisdom across the ages, your arm outstretched to sow,
we worship and adore you.

Holy Spirit, wind carries the seed causing fruit to flourish, we worship and adore you.

Life giving Trinity of creation and salvation, we worship and adore you. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Lord, we confess we are slow to tend the soil of our souls.

Help us to prepare ourselves as we would prepare our gardens for planting.

Let us contemplate the rocks that hinder growth.

We gather them and cast them out, digging deep for fertile soil.

Let us consider the thorns that choke new growth.

We root out all the things that smother God's Word in us.

Like soil turned over and ready to receive, we have confessed our shortcomings.

We turn to you in penitence and expectation and hear again the words of Jesus

'Your sins are forgiven' **Thanks be to God. Amen.**

Song – Here I am, wholly available

Ch) *Here I am, wholly available.*

As for me, I will serve the Lord.

1) The fields are white unto harvest
But oh the labourers are so few,
So Lord I give myself to help the reaping,
To gather precious souls unto You.

2) The time is right in the nation
For works of power and authority;
God's looking for a people who are willing
To be counted in His glorious victory

3) As salt are we ready to savour,
In darkness are we ready to be light?
God's seeking out a very special people
To manifest His truth and His might.

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Reading: Isaiah 55:10-13

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.

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure for ever.

God speaks and things happen. These verses form the end of the second section of the book of Isaiah. The prophet has been telling the exiles to get ready to go home. But they are not in the mood to listen. In this long poem (Isaiah 40 to 55), God has been outlining what is about to happen. Here, in the final few verses, the prophet says God's word is like the rain a farmer relies on to irrigate his crops. God speaks and things happen. In this case God's voice raises up Cyrus who sends the exiles home in joy and wonder at what God has done.

StF 157 – God has spoken by his prophets

1) God has spoken - by his prophets,
Spoken his unchanging word,
Each from age to age proclaiming
God, the one, the righteous Lord.
'Mid the world's despair and turmoil
One firm anchor holds us fast:
God eternal reigns forever,
God the first, and God the last.

3) God is speaking - by his Spirit,
Speaking to our hearts again,
In the age-long word expounding
God's own message, now as then,
Through the rise and fall of nations
One sure faith yet standing fast;
God still speaks, his word unchanging,
God the first, and God the last.

2) God has spoken - by Christ Jesus,
Christ, the everlasting Son,
Brightness of the Father's glory,
With the Father ever one;
Spoken by the Word incarnate,
God from God, ere time was born;
Light from Light, to earth descending,
Christ, revealing God to all.

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Reading: Matthew 13.1-9,18-23

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

'Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 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. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 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. 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. 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

This is one of Jesus' most famous parables. Often called the Parable of the Sower but which would perhaps be better titled the Parable of the Sower and the Soil for it is the relationship between the two that is critical to the outcomes in the story that Jesus tells.

When we moved house last year, one of the things we did was to install a vegetable patch in the garden. Proving that I am officially middle aged I have become a firm fan of Monty Don and Gardeners World. One of the key things I have learned from the tousled haired Lord of Longmeadow is that to grow anything you need good seed and good soil. Both of which are vital metaphors in today's parable. But this famous story is about so much more than how to get a healthy crop of carrots. To fully understand it we need to understand the story behind the story.



Jesus, as we know was soaked in the scriptures and this story is full of biblical imagery. It retells Israel's history: a sorry tale of not listening, of hardened hearts, of exile and partial restoration. It alludes to times when many in Israel felt that God was not with them, when despite hopeful prophetic utterances the nations were not flocking to Jerusalem to receive the Law. It was a familiar story for those who heard Jesus share the parable – they would have felt its pain; they were longing for the Kingdom of God to come. So, the punchline is somewhat baffling: in verses 8 and 9 the crop is growing spectacularly well. That which people have long hoped for is appearing - but where?

The disciples don't get it; but they do see that this is about more than just history. So, they ask Jesus why he's being so cryptic and what the parable means. Again, it's important to grasp the Old Testament passages lurking behind what Jesus says here, especially Isaiah 55:10-13. In that text, God's word stands for God himself coming: so, Jesus is both sower and seed. He is both the one bringing the fulfilment of God's plans, and God himself visiting and restoring Israel, bringing the kingdom right here, right now. The question when Jesus spoke was 'are you listening?' The question now is 'are we listening?'

So, Jesus was talking about the way things were, in the history of Israel. And because human nature doesn't change much, he is talking about the way things still are. He describes two groups of people. The first are those who hear the parables and shrug their shoulders. These are just pretty stories, nothing else. They don't believe the world needs to or could change. 'Climate change, why worry?' 'Refugees seeking safety, send them back -- or to Rwanda'. 'All need to be saved? Not me mate, I've done nothing wrong'.

They either don't believe they have a need for God or that God would send someone like Jesus to rescue them. So, they're not prepared to hang around for more. But Jesus is also talking about the way things could be. The other group is the disciples – then and now. Those who have the wisdom and humility to recognise that they and all of creation are in need of salvation and are grateful that in Jesus there is one who through his self-giving has made these things possible.

Here the first disciples operate as models for those of us seeking to follow Jesus today. They've been given the secrets of the kingdom (v.11), because they've stayed to find out more (v.12). They are asking questions – and that is how we learn how to be disciples. To be a disciple is to be learner. And to be a learner requires humility because - shock horror - we don't know it all. Discipleship is about following but it is also about paying attention, about listening and looking, hearing what Jesus is saying, seeing what he is doing, and wanting more.

When working with groups thinking about discipleship, I sometimes invite people to go through newspapers and magazines and find a picture that captures the essence of discipleship. My favourite picture that someone found was of the HMV dog. The one that sits next to an old gramophone with its ear raised. That they said is the essence of discipleship. It's about listening to the Master's voice.

Does that picture resonate with you? How well do we listen for and to the Master's voice, in creation, in scripture, in conversation, in prayer. Do we succumb to tempting voices, the shallowness of the constant search for novelty, or worries about mirages of wealth? Or do we dig deep into the good soil of prayer and scripture and loving conversation and listen for the voice of wisdom and grace? If discipleship is about listening, learning, and following, mission, to paraphrase Rowan Williams is about seeing what God is doing and joining in.

Jesus when he walked this earth was the Kingdom in action; we see it in what he did as well as hear it in what he said. The disciples saw him heal, feed the hungry, preach the good news and bring the isolated into his new family – this is the secret that was revealed to them as they paid attention. Do we see it? Missional discipleship is about a way of life, bearing fruit in our lives by hearing and doing, leaving an old way of understanding the world and God and beginning a new one in the new community God is gathering together around Jesus, based on hearing and doing his word.

And you know what? Sometimes we will get it right and sometimes we won't. In our veg patch so far the courgettes have been fabulous and the radishes have been a disaster. The runner beans and the broad beans have been lovely but they won't be serving our strawberries anytime soon at Wimbledon. We are learning and we will keep going. Digging in the home-made compost, clearing the rocks, pulling out the weeds and covering the cabbages to keep the pesky pigeons at bay.

May God give us the grace to do the spiritual equivalents in our lives so that each of us wherever God sets us and sends us will bear the fruit of his Kingdom to God's glory and for the blessing of both us and those we love and serve.

May it be so. **Amen.**

StF 407 – Hear the call of the kingdom

1) Hear the call of the kingdom,
Lift your eyes to the King;
Let his song rise within you
As a fragrant offering
Of how God, rich in mercy,
Came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in his unfailing grace.

*Ch) King of heaven, we will answer the call.
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion,
Filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.*

2) Hear the call of the kingdom
To be children of light
With the mercy of heaven,
The humility of Christ;
Walking justly before him,
Loving all that is right,
That the life of Christ may shine through us.

3) Hear the call of the kingdom
To reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion
In the wonder of the cross,
Bringing peace and forgiveness,
And a hope yet to come:
Let the nations put their trust in him.

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Prayers of Intercession - by debbiejstory based on the parable of the sower

Loving God, there are times when we watch the news on television or read our newspapers and find it hard to believe that things can ever change for the better. We pray for our world. We see countries broken by war. People consumed by hatred. Thousands living in fear. Nations turned against nations. So many people made homeless. Too many facing famine.

What hope can anyone offer? What help can possibly be given?

We pray for peace, for an end to the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Gaza and Israel.

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

We pray for so many people who face suffering, injustice, hardship and death. For those imprisoned for their political ideals or their faith in Christ. We pray for those who work for Justice. We pray for those who put their lives on the line to report the injustice in the world.

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

We pray for all who mourning from losing loved ones. You have promised your special blessing to those who mourn. Your comfort to those overwhelmed by grief. Your joy to those enduring sorrow. May they know that your hand is upon them, your arms encircling them and your heart reaching out to them.

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

We pray for your church. We pray for those who are serving you and for those who are ready to serve. For everyone who is longing to reach out in true faith and proclaim the good news. Grant them your wisdom, strength and courage. Sow the seeds of your love across the whole world. Cast the seed of your word to all who will listen.

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

We pray for people known to us who find it hard to believe things can change for the better. We see them racked by illness, weighed down by anxiety, tormented by depression, crippled by debt, broken by alcohol, scarred by bereavement, shattered by unemployment and we wonder what the prospects really are.

What hope we can realistically offer them? What help we can possibly give?

We pray in silence for such people known to us our family, friends, neighbours, members of our church and our community....[Silence]

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

We pray for ourselves. We thank you for all you have done for us in Christ. You have given a new dimension to our lives, a hope and purpose not of this world, but help us also to keep our feet on the ground. Let us be growers Lord, so that we may sow. Sow your seeds within us, so that we may grow. Help us to cast aside the weeds that would choke your seed. In silence we bring our concerns for ourselves, praying for your comfort, words of encouragement and to be reminded of your love....[Silence]

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

Help us to recognise you are at work and that things can change. Help us to see beyond appearances, recognising you are a God able to transform even the most hopeless situations. Give to us and to all people the assurance that there is no one and no situation unable to be transformed by your power.

Transforming God - **May your light shine where there is darkness**

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 418 – We have a gospel to proclaim

- 1) We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.
- 2) Tell of his birth at Bethlehem -
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.
- 3) Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.
- 4) Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.
- 5) Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.
- 6) Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

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Sending out prayer

Ever-giving God, we thank you that you have never stopped sowing your word among us. Give us receptive hearts and make us fruitful for you in the week to come. **Amen.**

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us, and this world that God loves, this day and for evermore. **Amen.**