

A sower went to sow

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

Listen! *"A sower went out to sow..."* "Parables are provocations. ...They raise questions, invite us into the use of thought and imagination, summon us to explore."ⁱ It is almost as if they are saying to us, 'Here's a little story. Let it work in you, work on you. Think about it, brood over it, talk about it. Maybe the story itself will be like the good seed in the sower story: giving a return out of all proportion to its size.'

This story is called the parable of the Sower; sometimes the parable of the soils. Maybe it should be called the Hundredfold Harvest. Even if the harvest were only thirtyfold, this story ends with a miracle. Sevenfold meant a good year for the farmer. Thirtyfold would feed a village for a year. A hundredfold would let the farmer retire to a villa by the Sea of Galilee.ⁱⁱ

But Jesus isn't talking about agriculture. He uses an image that the country people who first heard the story would understand, and then be drawn into thinking about the deeper meaning that lay behind His words. Jesus starts with a good dose of realism by observing the world within which He and His listeners lived. But then He goes on. The methodology of the sower, with his indiscriminate sowing, would produce mixed. The scattershot approach would mean some seeds fell on hard soil, other seed on ground too rocky for good roots, and still other seed among thorns and weeds. And some seed on productive good soil. Those are the facts of life, and Jesus knows it.

The focus is not on the Sower in the story. Nor is it on the seed and the harvest even though both are important. The focus is on the soil. Supposing the Sower is Jesus; supposing the seed is God's Word; supposing the harvest is what happens to God's Word when it is sown. This leaves us with

the soil the seed falls onto. In other words, for those with ears to hear, how do you receive God's Word, and how do you respond to it if you hear it? Listen! *"A sower went out to sow..."* The message is the same to everyone. But Jesus' words sometimes fail to take root in the hearers. Jesus is aware of the indifference, and the opposition, and the rejection His message faces. As in His day, so in ours. Listen! *"A sower went out to sow..."* Which part of this story reflects you and your life?

First the path. Some seed falls on the path. A mind, a heart, a life that in some way has grown hard. It's not an easy thought. Sometimes there is a hardness, a resistance, an imperviousness to our minds and hearts and lives. Not that this is always a sign of a bad life, but that sometimes life is hard towards us. An unrelenting struggle to make ends meet. A set of circumstances where chronic ill health, or bereavement, or being taken for granted, or being isolated turns us into beaten-down paths that seem to lead from one let-down to another, one hardship to another, one reason to complain to another. Not always our fault, but is there that kind of hardness about you today? Life, circumstance, unfairness, beating you down. And when the seed of God's good news falls on to you it has nowhere to go, and whatever message it had is taken away quickly by those outside forces because you can't hear it, or see it, or feel it. Life is too hard.

Then there's rocky ground. Some seed falls there. There's some possibility of growth, indeed, there *is* some growth. But the room to grow isn't deep. God's good news falls and is heard, and seen, and felt, but mere acknowledgement is not understanding, nor is it commitment. Are the times in life when you are happy to be in broad agreement with the principles of faith, and its moral requirements, and the general idea of what God's Kingdom and Church are about, but when it comes down to it, you are guided more by what it does *for* you, and not what you can do *for it*. Someone joining the Church to show willing before a wedding, or a baptism, but when the need

has gone, so often goes the individual. Reading our Church's baptismal roll I counted I had administered 87 child, and 13 adult baptisms. 100 baptisms in 25 years. Some have stayed, and grown, and flourished and play an important part in this Church's life. But the others, where are they now? John F Kennedy, in his inaugural presidential address in 1961 said, *"...ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country."* Ask not what your church can do for you - ask what you can do for your church. Have you seen the Church as a place from which you take, but not contribute towards? Is the seed of faith in your lives not that deep, and its shallow roots scorched by the sun of school sports on Sunday, family expectations, work pressure, secular society. Are you looking only to be entertained, or cosseted, or not made to think too much, or do too much?

How much are you hating this Jesus parable now? If only the Minister would get back to giving Donald Trump a hard time, or wonder about the Clacton by-election and Count Binface. Turn the holy spotlight on them, or anything, and not us! But no. Jesus says: Listen! *"A sower went out to sow..."*

Thorns come next. When it comes to faith has the seed of God's good news been sown, and fallen on productive soil, but there's competition. Are you finding life just too distracting? The cares of the world in your life? The pressures from different angles. The fixation on money and the getting of money. Your faith is there, but so also are rival demands on your time and energy. 'I used to come to church once a week. But I'm so busy with everything, so maybe twice a week will be enough, I mean, it's the 21st for goodness' sake. Or once a month, that's more than most people. Or Communion, I won't miss a communion service. Or it's all about Christmas and Easter, I'll definitely be in Church then.' It's not just about Sunday services, it's about all the other things the Church does, and charities do, where we can also show what our faith means to us. I don't preach

a counsel of perfection, but I wonder how many of us rather than weeding our lives to keep things clear, let weeds grow and before we know where we are our faith is choked out.

So far, so terrible. But Jesus doesn't stop there, with His finger wagging. Listen! *"A sower went out to sow..."* Some of the seed falls on rich topsoil. Yes our lives can be like hard paths, or shallow soil, or weed-infested wildernesses. But there is rich topsoil too. First listeners to Jesus' parable about the sower, and 2026 listeners this morning, shifting nervously about the implications of this parable for their/our lives, hear about the last seeds to fall. The story does not end with inhospitable soils or lives. It does not even end with a normal harvest from good soil and lives. It ends with a miracle. A hundredfold harvest. Those who accept the seed of God's good news and hold it fast, bear fruit and return a plentiful harvest. Jesus came into the world and said: *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*ⁱⁱⁱ The seed of God's news is sown to grow God's Kingdom. The prophet Isaiah wrote of God speaking: *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty."*^{iv} God's message is good news. It's not simply about keep on keeping on in the face of challenge and change and rejection. It is about believing in an abundant life. Living an abundant life. Growing an abundant life. This unsettling story from Jesus is ultimately one of encouragement and hope.

Our Harvest thanksgiving, and the abundance of faith providing food and money for the Foodbank. Our Edinburgh Clothing Store morning, and the abundance of faith providing clothing and money. Our Morningside Hope Project, and the abundance of faith providing a safe place and welcome and fun. Our Choral Scholarship programme, and the abundance of faith providing monies that help us make music to the glory of God. Our Umbrella Festival, mending our roof but

so much more where we reached out into the community. Jam and Baking, Coffee mornings, an Afternoon tea, a Baby and Toddler Group, a Flower Committee. The seed of God's good news is raining down upon the good soil of Morningside Parish Church, and is producing much. Through our faithful commitment of time and talents, and through our faithful financial giving, more will grow. Fruitful yield is the outcome of faithful discipleship. Here is a story from Jesus that virtually pleads for responsible and productive hearing. Faithful living requires hope and resilience. Faithful living teaches us to expect the best because we are attempting to be the best because of the good news Jesus has shared with us, abundantly. Listen! *"A sower went out to sow..."*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, *But I Say To You*, p171

ⁱⁱ Talitha J Arnold, *Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol 3* p236

ⁱⁱⁱ John 10:10

^{iv} Isaiah 55:10-11