

This reflection will be the basis of Revd Ali's sermon on Sunday, so if you are planning to join the service you will hear it then.

In the first part of today's Gospel reading (Matthew 13: 1 – 9) Jesus tells the gathered crowd the parable of the sower. Jesus was standing on a boat on a lake when he uses an earthy metaphor to speak about the word of God and the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus often used parables in his teaching. Parables can be paradoxical, they can seem to be a relatively straightforward story in the oral literary tradition, but they also tell of deep theological truths if the listener is prepared to delve into the context and content.

A crowd has gathered to be close to Jesus. They may have come to listen to him for a variety of reasons. There would have been Jesus' followers. The ones who had come close to Jesus over a period of time and have realised that this man was special, in some cases convinced that he was the Messiah, the one that Israel longed for. Others may have come out of curiosity, they may have heard something of Jesus' ministry and reputation. And others may have just seen a crowd and joined in to see what was going on.

Jesus tells them the story of, to our modern ears, the profligate sower, who spreads his seed far and wide seemingly without a care as to where the seed landed. A real contrast to contemporary farming methods with seeds sown in neat lines, carefully calculated distances between them, designed to maximise growth and minimise waste. The people listening to Jesus that day wouldn't have been as shocked as a modern audience would be by the sower's actions because of their knowledge of the local topography.

I was fortunate enough to visit the Holy Land a few years ago. When we were in Nazareth we visited a recreation of how Nazareth would have looked when Jesus was alive. Nazareth is now a large bustling town so 'the village' aims to show the Nazareth that Jesus would recognise. It is quite a hilly area and the land is a mixture of grass, gravel and large rocks, the kind of terrain that reminded me a little bit of Bodmin moor. Quite hard to cultivate crops without huge effort. Standing in that place, looking at the surrounding land, the parable of the sower started to make sense. When the seed was sown, some would have landed on the gravel or the rocks. If the farmer hadn't cleared the weeds and thorns completely then some seed would have fallen amongst them. It was a 'penny dropping' moment for me. So the context of the story is important. The people in Jesus' day lived close to the land, there wasn't a gulf between food production and consumption as there can be for us today.

Anyway, back to the parable. Jesus tells the story. He describes the actions of the sower and the consequences of the sower's actions. The seed sown on the path was eaten up by the birds, the seed sown on the rocky ground started to grow but didn't have enough deep enough roots to sustain its growth. The seed sown in the thorns was choked but the seed that fell on the good soil produced a bumper crop.

It could be said that the parable of the sower could be called the parable of the seed, as Jesus was trying to explain how the word and action of God is received in the world. Or maybe the parable of the soils focusing on how the path, rocks and the different types of soil are able to receive the word and action of God. However we describe this story, there is a parallel between the parable and the reception of Jesus' ministry by the people of God. Some hear, receive and grow and others, for a variety of reasons, don't.

So what does this parable have to say to us here in 21st Century Corley and Fillongley?

If we think about the seed in the parable, we can think of that seed as a metaphor for the word and action of God. Put more simply, we could think of the seed as love. We have a God of love whose action in spreading that love in the world is outrageously generous. The love that God showers on

the earth is for everyone and is clearly demonstrated in all of creation, but it is not always welcomed, received or acted upon.

Thinking about the path, where the birds swoop in and take the seed away, I wonder, what are the barriers that stop love from taking root in the world? Where are the places and situations that don't allow God's love in?

In the stony soil the roots of the seed cannot establish themselves. What in our world makes it so hard for love to thrive?

In the thorny ground where the seed is choked by weeds, what are the pressures that crowd out love? And how scarce in our world is the good soil, those places and situations where love takes root, flourishes, grows and then produces a yield that is so many times more than we could ever imagine.

During the pandemic, we have all witnessed acts of extraordinary love by many people. The key workers, the NHS and so many others going above and beyond. The good soil. But unfortunately, we have also seen examples of the opposite too. Greed and self-interest, the stony soil.

But what about us? I think if we are honest, then we can probably find evidence of each of the different types of soil in our lives every day. But Jesus doesn't end the parable with the exhortation to be good soil. Jesus understands that we cannot easily change our personalities or situations overnight, but we can trust in the promise that the sower keeps sowing extravagantly and generously even if the soil doesn't look too promising.

Jesus' promise is that regardless of where we find ourselves at this very moment he will not give up on us. Jesus will keep loving us regardless of those resistant, hardened or thorny places in our hearts and lives. Jesus will keep on pouring out the endless, outrageous gift of love on each of us. We just need to be prepared to respond and accept that love in our lives.

Opening ourselves up to a relationship with Jesus allows the seed to land and not be immediately swept away. Then, in partnership with Jesus we can tend to the thorny ground, weeding out the thought processes and behaviours that stop us flourishing in our faith journey. Over time, by living our lives for and with Jesus we can improve our soil and become fruitful. We can't build a garden from a wasteland overnight. But we can make the decision to start the work.

Jesus came to give us life, life in all its fullness. A life lived loving God and loving each other. A life that shines with the light of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen