

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Matthew 13.1-9

Jesus' parable of the sower is among the most familiar stories in the New Testament. A sower goes out to sow, and doesn't seem terribly bothered about how he does it. The seed falls all over the place – some along the path, which seems particularly careless, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some in good soil. At the time of his throwing out the seed, the sower is making no attempt to pay attention to the spot at which every single seed falls. He is scattering, putting it out there, laying the groundwork for lots of possibilities. The results of his work will not be visible for quite some time. But, whilst it is the case that only one in four of the situations results in the bearing of fruit, the quantities of fruit which come about – thirty, sixty, a hundredfold – leave the sower in no doubt of the success of his task.

Now unfortunately for you who are listening, this gospel passage is one of many which reminds me of my enthusiasm for the arcane delights of German New Testament scholarship. This morning, the temptation to indulge that enthusiasm is strong. It is a temptation which reminds me of my favourite PG Wodehouse story, *The Great Sermon Handicap*, in which a group of young men are running a book on the length of various pulpit orations. Some of them are so determined to keep a particular preacher's efforts as extended as possible that they urge him absolutely not to omit his "rather exhaustive excursus on the family life of the early Assyrians."

My equivalent of the family life of the early Assyrians would be the riveting details of first century Jewish agriculture. The question is this: which comes first, sowing or ploughing? It seems odd to ask. Surely one ploughs a field first before planting it. Well, that's the case now and in England, but there's some evidence that in the time and the place of Jesus' life and ministry, the opposite was the case. And this, for some New Testament scholars, provides the key to the parable of the sower. The extraordinary abandon with which the sower

casts his seed is explained by the process which will follow, whereby that seed will be ploughed into the land which is churned up to make it, or at least some of it, fertile. The seeds are thrown all over the place, but it is the subsequent violence of the ploughing which enables some of it to bear fruit. The parallels with the gospel message would then seem clear: the word is spread broadly, but the world in which it is spread is approaching the crisis of God's judgement, a crisis which in Matthew's gospel is played out through the passion and death of Jesus Christ. At the end of the gospel we are given the great commission to the apostles to make disciples of all the nations. The fruit of the gospel has yet to be harvested.

Now, no-one preaching in Oxford ought to downplay the importance of scholarship, but that reading might be said to qualify for as part of what Basil Fawlty describes as his wife's specialist subject: the bleeding obvious. And it's not clear that the details of the farming process make very much difference. The text is unequivocal that the sowing is done in a rather free for all manner, and that much of the seed is lost. Some, however, springs up in quite extraordinary abundance. Sevenfold was reckoned a good yield, but we have thirty and

sixty and a hundred fold. It's the growth which matters. The parables of Jesus are littered with this basic image of something small and unseen, something secret and unknown, manifesting itself as something new and striking, even entirely unexpected. The contrast between the before and the after is marked and remarkable, but the process itself is likely to be unnoticed.

The summer in Oxford is always a time of flux. Many of our community travel elsewhere, many of you among us this morning will be visitors and sojourners. Exams have come to an end, student days are over for many, people are moving on. The building around us shows ever more sign of change in an attempt to arrest its decay, and within a week or two we shall find ourselves worshipping elsewhere. Such a time of flux is inevitably a good time for reflection. And the parable of the sower asks us to reflect upon growth, upon all sorts of examples of change, of events and ideas and experiences which are past, but which bear fruit in our lives and will continue so to do.

The image of faith which the parables present is very far from the arid epistemological calculus of the new atheism, whereby religious faith is held to consist in the act of assenting to a series of propositions, rather as one might check off one's list of necessities in Tesco's or, perhaps more likely, try to remember what was on the list which we left in the kitchen before we set out. Christian faith is not so much something which is thought as something which is done, a way of living within, and looking around, the reality we call the world, a way which allows us to focus the journey of our lives not simply on ourselves but on something infinitely beyond ourselves, something which will – paradoxically – point us back to where we are and direct our attention to the needs of the other whom we cannot but encounter if we are engaged with the business of being human.

As Jesus so often reminds us, seeds are unlikely to be noticed when sown. The effects of such faith are unlikely to be perceived as they begin to grow. Among the hardest lessons we have to learn is the truth that our determination for control, our desire to be in charge of everything about

ourselves, is a false hope for something impossible. Having the courage to let go, to accept the gift of the other, the infinite possibility of relationship, the opportunity to give as well as receive, is a lesson in wisdom which Christian faith will teach as it searches out the truth of what it is to be a disciple, a word which means simply one who learns. The disciples are those who have the privilege of knowing the mystery, or the secret of the kingdom of God. The secret that manifests itself not in the instant of beginnings but in the gradual manifestation, the coming to fruition, which is the end of the journey of faith.

Growing in that faith, being taught the love of God, is something of which we will not be aware in the moment. But there will be glimpses to encourage our desire, there will be epiphanies, flashes of the extraordinary which engage us on the journey, signs of hope, acts of healing, moments of kindness, words of love. Above all, however, it will be the ordinary, the mundane, the unnoticed, in which we will do our growing. The things on which we look back, the patterns we see forming as we piece our lives together, are the gifts which open our eyes to the ever widening horizon towards which we

are directed. The seeds of love are scattered far and wide, but they bear fruit thirty, sixty and a hundred fold.