

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Romans 8.1-11

Mt.13.19,18-23

Sowing for Harvest Proper 10 A

I wonder how the Gospel reading for today leaves you feeling. Maybe you just heard it as something very familiar – a tale that has been with you since Sunday school, and you just feel comfortable with it – or even (dare I say it?) faintly bored. But, if that's the case, if it hasn't moved you this morning to any particular feeling, can I ask you to stop a minute, and just think through the parable of the sower that Jesus told, and the explanation that's given afterwards, and then ask yourself where you're left at the end. You might like to look over the passage as it's printed in your pew slip, now...

So, I ask you again, how does this parable leave you feeling? Does it leave you feeling anxious, or depressed - all the ways in which the sower's work can be frustrated – all the possibilities there are for people, including yourself, to get it wrong, and not receive the word of God fruitfully ...: or, on the other hand, do you take away from the parable the

positive ending – the picture of the good harvest – a yield of thirtyfold and sixtyfold, and a hundredfold – a field golden with waving grain, despite the wastage of some of the seed? Is this, for you, a parable of encouragement, or one of warning?

What do you think it was meant to be in the context of Jesus' life, and for his first followers? And how would it have been heard by the earliest readers of Matthew's Gospel?

One way of getting at a parable's early meaning is to look at it in its context in the Gospel story. And, indeed, today's passage invites us to do just that: it starts with the words, '*That same day...*'

What same day, we need to ask? What had just happened? Well, according to Matthew (and to Mark, too), when Jesus told this story he'd just had a bruising encounter with his family: his mother and brothers had come to the door of the house where he was preaching, and called for him to come out. It seemed they wanted to take him home. They must have been anxious for him – after all, John the Baptist had recently been executed, and Jesus, too, was clearly making enemies; and

perhaps they wanted him home to fulfill the normal responsibilities of an eldest son for a widowed mother and younger siblings (so, back to the carpenter's shop, then!) Certainly it seems they couldn't see the point of what he was doing. And it's always bruising, isn't it, when you're doing something you're convinced is the most important thing in the world, and your family just doesn't get it.

But the bruises hadn't all been one way – we know that, too. Jesus had sent his relatives away without even seeing them; but perhaps as they'd left empty-handed, they'd heard his voice ring out from the house, *'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?...Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'* (Matt.12.48,50).

It was a moment of painful incomprehension, and Jesus must have felt both sides of it, because his character combined absolute clarity of purpose with infinite compassion; in human terms, it must have been a moment which felt hugely discouraging.

And then, on the same day, according to Mark and Matthew, we hear the parable of the Sower. And who is it Jesus is speaking of here? Who is the Sower? Surely, himself. He's speaking in guarded terms about the effect his preaching is having, and will have. He has his enemies already, implacably opposed to the claim that God's kingdom is somehow coming close in this upstart carpenter from Nazareth. But the truth is there, all the same, if you're willing to perceive it: *'Let anyone with ears listen!'* (Matt.13.9).

So, if Jesus is the Sower, in the parable's original meaning, is it a depressing story or an encouraging one?

Jesus' words are already being received in different ways and having different effects; his heart must already have been aching about the people who hear him with hardened hearts or other preoccupations at the top of their minds; his divinely human intuition must already have been telling him that even his new friends and disciples would not stand up to the time of trial – the persecution – that would surely come. They would desert him and flee. All this reality is observed in

the parable, calmly observed for people to ponder on. But the thrust of the story is towards the abundant harvest – the thirtyfold, the sixtyfold, the hundredfold – which will make it all worthwhile. The Sower keeps on walking through his field, the field of God's people, scattering broadcast the word of the kingdom. He isn't deterred by what seems like wasted effort and signs of discouragement, because one day he knows the harvest will appear - even if it means that himself has to become a seed and fall into the ground and die before that can happen. *'Let anyone with ears listen!'* This is a parable of hope.

And if that was the earliest meaning of the parable, what should it mean for us today? Should it be a mirror for us to hold up, and ask where we see the state of our own hearts reflected? Do they provide hard or stony ground, thistles, weeds or good, tilled loam for God to sow into? Looked at this way, the parable becomes one of self-examination, or even of warning. You can certainly use the parable that way, and many people have. I certainly don't think that's wrong.

But what if we keep the perspective of the sower, and see ourselves as lesser sowers, walking in Jesus' steps?

Isn't that how all the sermons preached from this pulpit over the last few months, about sharing in God's mission, would encourage us to see ourselves? And if we are lesser sowers – followers of the Lord in sowing the word of his kingdom – don't we need just the kind of encouragement this parable gives? Encouragement which is realistic about the times our effort seems wasted or lost; encouragement which acknowledges the mystery that some people simply do reject the message and the love of God – rejection or misunderstanding which is so very painful to us, particularly if it's within our own families – and yet an encouragement which tells us never to give up: there's a harvest which will surely come. As disciples and a church, we have to keep moving on with Jesus, always walking the field, even where it looks an unpromising one, sowing the seed widely, not keeping it to ourselves.

If we keep the seed of God's kingdom to ourselves, it may feed us for a season; but if we cast it out,

generously and with prodigal disregard for the difficulties, it will feed not only us, but thirties, sixties, hundreds more, in a harvest that will never end.

That's the joy we're called to: not just to *be* the harvest, but to see it in other lives too, - in our community, and in our society, in many, many ways: all because we want to be faithful, because we want to walk in our Master's steps. Because we want to live in his Spirit and walk by that Spirit's impulse.

Amen.