

13.7.14 – TRINITY 4

Isaiah 55.1-11; Matt.13.1-9, 18-23; Romans 8.1-11

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I do love today's passage from Isaiah. Just listen to these words:

“As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth, making it bud and flourish 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”.

Like so much of scripture, that passage is rooted in the history of Israel, and yet – ***amazingly*** - can speak to us in our own context today.

Addressed to the Exiles in Babylon, Isaiah's words offer a message of hope. God's word here, is a reference to his promise that the people would return to their beloved Jerusalem and that the land would be restored. They would ***“return with joy and be lead forth in peace”***. That promise *was* fulfilled.

The seed – God's word – did not return empty, but achieved the purpose for which he sent it. The word of God, as the psalmist said, is powerful and effective. Despite human weakness and failure, it will yield a rich harvest.

The metaphor of God's word as the seed is a powerful image for us today.

Driving to Suffolk recently, I couldn't help noticing some of the crops beginning to ripen already ... the result of the early Spring and summer sunshine ... but it would not be as good or fruitful a harvest without the preparation done by the farmer ... to plough and till and feed the land ... to provide the right conditions for the crop to grow. It is, without doubt, the condition of the soil that will make all the difference.

And perhaps we could say the same about our receptivity to the word of God.

Today's parable about the sower, compels us to ask, what kind of ground am I? How receptive, how open to growth?

This familiar passage comes at a turning point in the Ministry of Jesus. Whilst crowds flocked to see him, opposition to him was steadily growing. The doors of the

synagogues were beginning to close to him. ... and so he began preaching from the seashore and to use parables.

The disciples who, as we know, had followed him gladly, must have been puzzled as to why there was such opposition to him. And we sometimes wonder about that, too, don't we.

Today's parable goes some way to explaining that conundrum, but as we can see, it's meaning wasn't immediately obvious to them. The word parable comes from the Greek *parabole* ... which means laying things side by side. William Barclay speaks of parables as "truth pictures", from which we have to discover the truth for ourselves. And as we see, even the disciples needed help to do that.

So how do we understand it? Well, the word of God is not unlike a seed in a number of ways.

It has life-giving power.

It has fruit-bearing quality – just one seed can produce a great harvest – eg sunflowers..

It must be planted *and* nourished.

And – and here is the key – it is the quality and the preparedness of the soil and the continuing care of it, that enables the seed to grow and to flourish.

Many conditions can prevent the seed of God's word from taking root or from developing further ... The mind closed by prejudice ... experience of tragedy or injustice, by loss or suffering; by the arguments of others ... or perhaps lives so busy there is simply no room for it to grow.

And like seeds in the desert, sometimes those seeds may lay dormant for many years, or may struggle for existence, until the rains come or conditions are more favourable.

Images of growth in both readings remind us that the Christian life is not intended to be settled or static. We are meant to keep on growing in faith and in our knowledge and understanding of God. That growth will be precarious at times ... as is growth in our gardens and in our countryside. Just as it is affected by drought ... by storms ... by vigorous weeds and so on, we, too, can be thrown by the storms of life, which sometimes leave us feeling dry and arid .. and at others overwhelmed by circumstances.

Today's parable was directed to two sets of people ... the crowd, who had probably come for any number of reasons – to see him, to be healed by him, perhaps to be fed

didn't want to follow him, or accept him. Maybe they were beginning to doubt, or to lose heart. It was they who, in due course, would become seed sowers themselves.

At the heart of the parable, though, as in the words of Isaiah in our first reading, was that the harvest was sure. And I think we should take great encouragement from that.

Herbert Gee tells a story about a lonely old man in the church where he worshipped. Old Thomas had outlived all his friends and hardly anyone knew him. When Thomas died, Gee had the feeling that there would be no one at his funeral, so he decided to go, so that there might be someone to follow the old man to his last resting place. There was no one else at the funeral, and it was a wild, wet day. The funeral reached the cemetery; and at the gate there stood a soldier, a Brigadier. He came to the graveside, and after the ceremony, stepped forward and gave a salute fit for a king. Afterwards, he said: "You will perhaps be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago Thomas was my Sunday School teacher. I was a wild lad and a sore trial to him. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am or will be to old Thomas, and today I have to come to salute him at the end."

Thomas never knew ... but the seeds he had faithfully sown in that man's life, and probably in many others as well, bore much fruit.

A seed needs to be watered and nourished continually, so that it can mature and produce good fruit. The same is true of our spiritual lives.

Reflecting on today's parable, perhaps we should ask ourselves, whether there is anything in our lives that is getting in the way of our receiving God's word and continuing to grow ... and what we might be able to do about it.

Let us pray:

In the words of our first hymn:

Speak to us, O Lord, believing, as we hear, the sower sows:
May our hearts, your word receiving, be the good ground where it grows.

Amen

