

15TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford
Sunday, July 10th, 2011

Is.55: 10-13, Roms. 8:1-11 and Matt.13: 1-9, 18-23

INTRODUCTION

"A sower went out to sow ..."

With those few words Jesus introduces the Parable of the Sower. Probably for many of us this story vividly brings to mind images from childhood when we first heard it read or saw pictures depicting the scene. As a child in Sunday School I saw a field with a pathway that had become hardened by feet tramping; saw those thorn bushes that had sprung up and prevented anything else from growing. And I saw the weeds – the weeds among the wheat. Finally, of course, I saw wheat lazily wafting in the breeze. Thankfully I grew up near the countryside. God knows what someone would make of the parable if they grew up in Hackney!

Like many teachers in ancient times Jesus frequently made use of parables – story's drawing on everyday events which have an immediate appeal but which carry deeper meanings. The parable of the sower seems to have a simple point to it, and the writer even gives an explanation as to what the parable means. But most scholars believe the ending was added at a later stage, for parables by their very nature were not explained. They were images that, rather like that seed, were meant to enter into our hearts and minds to work at a deeper level within us. As one writer has said: *'Jesus used parables because they provoked thought and coaxed the listeners into participating more actively as they considered the parables' ambiguous content.'* (Stephen L. Harris)

CONTEXT

Jesus told this parable in the context of his early ministry when he was exploring his concept of the 'Kingdom of God' whose coming we pray for each time we say the 'Our Father'. This 'kingdom' is not some super-state but rather concerns right relationships with God, each other and the self and this notion remains at the core of our faith. The Kingdom (or, as many people now say, the 'Reign') is God's 'new creation'. You and I live in that Reign simply by virtue of being a Christian. At least, we are meant to just as subjects of the Crown are meant to be living in accordance with the laws and customs of our country. But, of course, that doesn't always happen! The actual context in which Jesus offers this parable – sitting by the Lakeside up there in northern Israel – was one where people weren't always good Jews, just as there are people living in this country who are not good citizens. And, rather than tell them how to live their lives, he simply tells this parable. So, what does it say to you?

THE PARABLE EXPLORED

Now, whilst I want to avoid the temptation to 'explain' the parable, maybe we might look at it a bit more deeply.

The great 20th century Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, wrote of this 'seeding' of the earth:
'Every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of

spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.'

Merton is bringing to mind the fact that Jesus' parable is about life-giving seeds, not the seeds of weeds. These come, as well – there are always weeds among the wheat – but what Jesus wants to direct our attention to is the good seed which is constantly, lavishly, broadcast by the sower.

Someone has pointed out that a Palestinian sower would have simply cast handfuls of seeds on the ground – it's called 'broad-casting' for obvious reasons. Clearly the sower is not too concerned with where the seed falls – good soil, pathways, rocky patches – all are in range of sowing. We, if you like, are the ground into which the seed falls. So one of the questions we might individually reflect on this morning concerns the ground of *our* being. What's it like? Where are the hard parts? Where are the parts which have been surfaced over to create pathways? What thorn-bushes fill the ground of our lives?

Perhaps we might reflect on just how receptive the ground of our being is to the seeds that God scatters. Is part of our heart 'hardened' to those seeds? Is it so full that there is not space left to receive them? Or are we cultivating our hearts to be ready to receive what God casts into our lives? Do we really want to receive the seed that Gods scatters?

And another thing about this parable: just consider the profligacy of the sower. As in so many others Jesus tells, the understanding that gives this story its thrust is the generosity of God. The sheer sense of God's lavishness. This is no careful planting of seeds – this is, in a sense, wasteful. The sower *knows* that much seed is not going to land on fertile ground but, nonetheless, he casts it around with abandon. It connects with other parables like that of the Prodigal Son whose father lavishes him with his love. Those who heard Jesus tell this story would immediately have recognised that he was talking about the nature of God as well as encouraging them to consider themselves in relation to Him. As the great poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote:

*Though when the sower sowed,
The wingèd fowls took part, part fell in thorn,
And never turned to corn,
Part found no root upon the flinty road—
Christ at all hazards fruit hath shewed.* Gerard Manly Hopkins 1844-1889

'Christ at all hazards fruit hath shewed' – I love that line for I recognise that I am that hazard from which Christ longs to bring a harvest. And so are you.

SEEDTIME AND HARVEST

Now you may be thinking to yourself, *'all this about broadcasting seed is fine – I don't want to be a hard person or to have my life filled with weeds. After all, I want to be fertile! But just how do I know what seeds to cultivate?'*

Well, last week we considered how we need to be discerning about the 'voices' we heed and how we might distinguish those which draw us to life and those which will drive us away from what we are called to become. Now, when it comes to being open to all those seeds which are being scattered over us, St. Paul suggested a way to distinguish those which lead to life. In his Letter to Christians in Galatia he uses the image of two opposing 'pulls' which he calls the 'flesh' and the 'spirit' and he says that the way to distinguish between them is to realise what 'fruits' they produce.

And he says quite directly that the harvest of allowing ourselves to cultivate the seeds of the 'flesh' *'are obvious: fornication, impurity, ... enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, ... , and things like these.'* And he goes on to say that these do not allow the Reign of God to develop within us. Whereas *'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'* (Gal. 5:16-25)

CONCLUSION

When Jesus told the Parable of the Sower he did not specify how the parable was to be understood. He simply told the story of a sower who casts his seeds and what can happen to those seeds. "Let anyone with ears listen!" Others, of course, also sow seeds. *"By their fruits you shall know them"* (Matt. 7:20).

There are so many 'seeds' being cast on the ground of our being which can be a fertile place for wheat and weeds. For the fruits of the flesh and the Spirit.

So, what do you need to do to encourage the fruits of the Reign of God to flourish in the field of your life?

Amen.