

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Isa 55:10-13 Psalm 65: 8-end Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Many of you will have heard me talk about "Godly Play" before. It is a lovely way of drawing children (and grown-ups for that matter) into imaginative exploration of Bible stories – not only giving them knowledge of the stories many of us first learnt in childhood, but offering something of the experience of the first hearers of Jesus parables: a sense of wonder and puzzlement, holding them with his teaching so it comes alive in them. In Godly Play the materials to tell parable stories are contained in gold boxes. The story teller begins every parable with a story telling formula given each time. Gold is very precious: this story is very precious.

The box is a bit like a gift: this is a gift given to each of us before we were even born.

You have to open the box to come to the story: sometimes parables open to us very easily, sometimes we have to wait a long time for the story to open its treasure for us, sometimes we find new treasures when we open the story again.

So today we are offered a parable: a precious gift, given thousands of years before we were born and carefully passed on to us. It is probably a story we have come to again and again and again, and that is why it is good to remember that every time, a parable can open in a new way if we are open too.

Jesus used the story tellers art to get his hearers attention – beginning and ending with the command "Listen".... "let anyone who has ears, listen"

In the Hebrew tradition, a command to “listen” to the word of God was a command to hear and act, to allow the word of God to change you, as God says through Isaiah:

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it
(Isa 55:11)

God’s word is something active and transforming, a means of encounter between God and all who hear it.

I wonder how often when we read or hear this parable we think about the seed?

Seeds are quite remarkable. They contain within them all that is necessary for potential new plant, and the initial nourishment to begin growth when the conditions are right.

In this parable there is an abundance of seed – cast out in all directions with an almost reckless generosity to make sure that some of it falls where it can grow.

I wonder how often the seeds of God’s word have been scattered over each of us:

- How frequently we read God’s word
- How frequently we encounter the word in the midst of our worship
- How frequently we hear it in general life – because after thousands of years it has found its way into the fabric of our culture (often unrecognised now but still there)
- How frequently it comes to mind to give words to something we experience: the beauty of nature, the pain of loss, a holding onto hope or moment of insight

I wonder if we recognise in ourselves the times when it lies on the surface of our hearts and minds and is swept away before anything changes in us.

I wonder if we can think of times when for a moment we feel inspired and have good intentions to respond to the impulse, but then the pressures of life just push it out of our consciousness.

And more painfully those times when it stifled by life's more deep rooted challenges.

Given how much of God's word many of us have received, we are likely to be able to think back to when it doesn't seem that we have been changed by what we have heard.

But,

I wonder if you can recall times when you have felt like a passage or phrase, or even a single word has been spoken just for you?

A time when God's word has felt like God's direct contact with you, speaking into what you are experiencing and helping you trust God's presence and guidance in your own circumstances?

A time when the word has indeed put down its roots deep into your open heart and grown, fruitfully, to connect you more actively with a sense of God at the centre of your words, actions and life?

If such times come quite easily to mind, stay with the memory allowing yourself to dwell on the effect of these words and the fruit they have brought.

If it is less easy to bring a memory to mind, I wonder if it might be worth experimenting with changing your expectations about what might happen when you read or listen to scripture and to pray, with the young Samuel, before encountering a passage, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening", in an inviting and open heart to listen for what God might want to grow in it with the seeds of this word.

For some of the saints, their life story is marked by just such experiences. St Antony was present at a reading of the gospel in which Jesus tells the rich young man: "Go sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come follow me." And he heard it as addressed directly to him, and in conversion gave up all his property and became a monk in the

desert, teaching and guiding others and becoming a founder of monasticism.

His story is recalled by St Augustine in his Confessions as he recalls his own conversion. Having lived a dissolute life, and yet seeking through philosophy and scholarship an elusive sense of life's deeper meaning, Augustine hears a voice in a Milan garden "pick up and read" and returns to the book of Romans he had been reading and he sees chapter 13:13-14 which commands the rejection of drunken parties and debauchery and to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" . Augustine says:

"I wished to read no further. At once, with the last words of the sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All shadows of doubt were dispelled."

These are famous and dramatic conversions stories, but it is my privilege as a priest to hear more private examples in everyday experiences of those who take God's word seriously.

There is enough of God's word to go round, to speak to each of us, to grow in each of our hearts a fruitful harvest.

All we have to do is to offer our open hearts with the desire to be the good soil for the seed of the word, to bring to all those times it is scattered – in personal devotion, public worship, in cultural life and memory – a willingness for it to take root deeply in us and to work out in us the purpose for which God sent it.

"Listen! A sower went out to sow" begins Jesus.

That sowing has not finished and is as generous now as God has ever been, so every time we receive God's word may, we who have ears, listen. Amen

