

Trinity 5 Sermon (Isaiah 55.10-11, Romans 8.18-23, Matthew 13.1-9)

Degrees of Faith.

I'm sure many of you have planted seeds over this last 4 months. Some will have done well and I have to admit I have already eaten beans and lettuce planted at little effort some months ago. Other things will have done less well – I'm particularly disappointed at the sunflowers in the church garden but maybe it was something to do with the seed or I planted at the wrong depth or the squirrels have found them...who knows. My spinach seems to have emerged as mushrooms – pretty ones but I think hardly edible. It can be fun it can be frustrating but if all goes well it's always rewarding to display or eat something you have grown – the fruits of your labour. That's why I like fruit and herbs they take little labour and yield much fruit year after year once established.

The parable of the sower is one of the best known of Jesus's parables. Remember the parables are all stories of the kingdom of God. They often have many meanings which we carry with us as we progress through our life and faith. If this sermon has a title it is: *degrees of faith*. Last week I shared with you a story of the beginnings of mine and I'm sure for all of us whether at the beginning middle or towards the end of our earthly lives – our faith story may feel at a different stage to where it was but a few months ago let alone a few years ago. For some, what is important will have been distilled and deepened. For others it may feel like a new beginning and for yet others – it's just a struggle - like hacking through thorns to reveal a treasured plant. Jesus knows all this – all the parables are parables of generosity – we thought about this last Lent – or started to.

A seed drill is a most precise machine it delivers the right seed, in the right quantity, at the right depth, at the right time and place chosen by the farmer. This is a long way from the Israel of Jesus. Around the comfortable pleasant waters of the lake of Galilee the technique was quite different. The machines we have were not available. The seed would be scattered quite liberally and only after would a rudimentary plough turn over the earth. Only at that point would you know if it were shallow or you'd hit a rocky patch and so on.

We may question the method but Jesus is not trying to be Monty Don. Jesus is drawing from everyday observation of life to draw people to God not to achieve best in show for vegetables. We need not explain the whole parable for Jesus does that himself: the birds for demons that snatch away what is precious, the thorns for riches and worldly cares, and shallow roots for initial enthusiasm that has no staying power and depth. However, these very explanations will lead us to more questions about ourselves and where we are in our lives of faith, of purpose and meaning. Jesus is preaching not just to the disciples, but to the crowds. They have different degrees of faith. Jesus is quite clear it doesn't need much *seed* to hit the right spot and be nurtured for the same generosity that flows from God to be repeated. It is repeated in

the life of people who not only listen but take the faith to heart. Those who allow it to root to be nurtured, those who are patient – from them comes a hundredfold – it more than makes up for what seems to be wasted and lost.

We have seen this at work in our local and national lives have we not? The good efforts – the playing out of love of God and Neighbour has a huge multiplier effect in our common life. Old men and little boys doing things for others and not for self has had quite an impact. I'm sure they would be parable material if Jesus were here in an earthly way. But he is here and with us in a heavenly and spiritual way. Jesus is the word, he is the seed and he is also the sower who has planted something in you and me. Not only that, he continues to do so, he doesn't stop sowing whatever our age and situation.

This parable is not so much about faith or belief on the one hand and complete lack of faith or unbelief on the other. The disciples have come to follow Jesus, the crowds have come to hear him. We have come to do the same - the spirit is with us. We have been drawn but we will all face or perhaps we are now facing what that the parable is really about for us at different degrees in our faith. Life is not a neat walk from rocky ground to good soil as it were, or emerging from the thicket of thorns never to return. Life is not linear but complex – life's stuff spoils the good soil in each and every one of us at different times and in different ways. This parable is indeed about degrees of faith.

In the cycle of life and faith we face the dangers of the parable. The dangers of allowing our faith to be snatched away – probably less likely by demons than an attitude of carelessness to Gods generosity. The dangers of deceptive worldly riches and cares that are deceptive because they will pass away. The dangers of shallow roots that offer no resilience in a world that talks much of its value but not of its spiritual source. The Disciples exemplar the good soil. An easy life they will not have, but eternal life and value they will. They will come to have it in all its' abundance because of God's generosity in Christ. In his passion, death and resurrection the fullness of God is revealed. The parables they heard will take root afresh and flower into their true meaning. Perhaps months or even years later they will say "Ah that's what he meant!" By growing degrees of faith, Christ is revealed in them abundantly for the sake of many. We are their heirs and by growing by degrees of faith we may do the same. Above all take from this parable the generosity – the wastefulness if you like - of the sower. Do not loose heart for Christ the sower is still showering us with Gods generosity.

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