

A Sower went out to sow ...

... 'Good soil' as God's Love

A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Trinity, 12th July 2020, by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale in the Online Communion Service

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

So what did you achieve during lockdown? Personally, I learned to speak four new languages; I completed a book; I ran several marathons around my garden [obviously]; I raised enough money for the whole new roof on the minister; and I grew tomatoes. Thankfully, none of this is true or else none of you would ever want to speak to me again. In reality, I made a few dubious video recordings [like this one], and I ate a lot of cake!

However, I am aware of some amazing things that our minister congregation has done during its confinement: Rachel completed a beautiful tapestry that she started many years ago [and if you want to see it, it's behind her and Niamh during the gospel reading from last week]; Ben built a shed and replaced his decking [with only one trip to A&E]; Libby produced the most incredible embroideries [do ask her to show you them]; and two nameless ladies are on their way to completing the 'Couch to 5K'.

However, the biggest achievements of the greatest number of people that I've spoken to appears to be in the beautiful things they have seen or grown in their gardens. We are incredibly privileged to live in this beautiful part of Yorkshire where most people have access to some green space. And people have been sowing and pruning and weeding and planting and feeding and admiring wildlife. Our weekly Zoom coffee chats have demonstrated the green fingered members of the congregation and the amazing natural beauty that they have enhanced and enjoyed.

So back to me. I didn't learn four languages, although I do now understand a lot more technical vocabulary, largely thanks to Tim: words like Zoom and teams and iMovie and cutaway, render, upload, split, and several words that I shouldn't use in the minster. I didn't write a book: but I have read a few more than usual, which has been a delight. I didn't even run one marathon: but I have tried to start running again after ten years off for injury. But I haven't grown tomatoes: I tried, thanks to Mary, but

I failed. I regularly cause my gardening parents to weep at my utter lack of green fingers as I allow my plants to dry out, drown or simply die of neglect: the weeds repeatedly score the victory. I've long since recognised that to produce anything in the soil that is of beauty or good to eat, you need several qualities that I lack, namely: planning; patience; persistence; and plenty of time. My mom has a year round diary that she updates daily with what she's planted when and the results so that she can learn and improve year on year. She and dad plan meticulously where his bonsai collection can go, which plot is for vegetables and what flowers will flourish in their particular soil type. Every bean is planted in a precise row, provided with a cane and loved into producing the delicious green vegetables that I enjoy eating - you get the idea.

[Wendy now shows various images]

Here are my chillis - yeah, they got scorched; my cauliflower - yes, the birds enjoyed that; my tomatoes - that's where they were; and my weeds - they're doing great.

I think the reason I love the parable of the sower is because on a horticultural level, he appears to approach the sowing task a bit more like me than my parents. He clearly doesn't throw his seed with any kind of plan or precision - it lands all over the place. He just scatters far and wide: the birds eat some; the sun scorched some; and the thorns and the weeds did their thing. But despite his lack of wise planting, there was still an incredible crop, which brings me great comfort and hope.

You see parables are pictures, a way to explain faith continues to allow for mystery and interpretation. They tell us something important about the nature of God. Jesus tells his followers that the seed is like the message of the kingdom and how people receive it. And I've been reflecting on what this parable might mean for us as we begin to consider meeting here again, thinking back as to how we might have changed and how our faith might have struggled or flourished during this time.

Perhaps, as you listen, you might recognise yourself as being different seeds at different times, which is exactly what a parable should enable you to do. You might have started lockdown with all the best intentions in the world: you would read the whole Bible cover to cover; spend hours in prayer each day; organise your charitable giving; contact loads of people to encourage and bless them.

But then the home-schooling began; you had to go to work wearing PPE; the relentlessness of boredom kicked in; the lack of routine. The good intentions remained just that. You might have been locked down alone, and the battle with loneliness felt like you were being scorched, unable to pop to the shops or the minster. Phone calls are no substitute for human contact. Staying connected to God was hard and exhausting work. I'm aware that for so many the forms of worry, anxiety, grief or depression have been, oh, so very real: fears for our family; heartbreak for the thousands who died; concern for the frontline staff; little to look forward to; missing the reassuring routines and interventions that keep things on a level; for those who own a business or are self-employed; for those in the arts world or have been made redundant. The thorns caused deep wounds, stretching trust and faith to their limits.

I doubt there is anyone who has completely avoided the weeds of confusion as things have begun to unlock. The new normal is a strange land where the familiar has changed: churches reopened without singing, without a choir, without a choice of seat, without hugging or coffee; children's education is in a state of flux; routine health care is 'backed-up'; face masks are a part of life. So many are just exhausted. But because the parable reflects reality, within all those weeds and thorns and scorched and rocky paths, there will be seeds that have flourished. Each of us will have new understandings of God; deep places where we have encountered grace; new relationships that have formed online; fresh insights that can only come from the 'desert places'. And we will bring our produce together and share it as the body of Christ.

You see, my garden is actually quite lovely, despite of the truth of everything I told you. It's lovely because Tom has been weeding and watering. It's lovely because my friend Emily brought us a beautiful rose from Kew Gardens. It's lovely because my parents come and stay and spend hours out there planting and planning and sharing their passion and patience. It's lovely because the sun shines and the breeze blows and I can see the minster from over the fence.

We will shortly share communion together, virtually and spiritually, wherever we are. Many of us have missed gathering for communion so deeply because it is the place where we all share the produce: we receive the bread and wine, the product of the physical earth and the spiritual life and death of Jesus; communion is where we are

reminded that it is not because of our own efforts in planning, planting and harvesting, that we are loved by God and invited into his feast, but by his mercy and grace; it is in communion where we bring the wounds of the weeds and the thorns - we bring our scorched and our barren parts, and we are made lovely; it is in communion that we reach out and share with others when we have a plentiful harvest.

During our communion this week, we will hear Louise Macphee singing an extract from Haydn's 'Creation' and during that, there will be a PowerPoint showing member's of the Minster's gardens and their lovely produce.

The gift of music and the gift of Creation's beauty are offered to us as 'good soil': God's love, calling us to return to communion with him and to one another; to dwell in 'good soil'; to enjoy His fruits; His feast; His presence.

Reading Text

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."