

The Word of God: if we don't listen ...

... we won't hear

A sermon given on the Sixth Sunday of Trinity, 16th July 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The American comedian Rita Rudner once said she hated housework - all that cleaning and dusting, and then six months later, you've got to do it all over again. I feel a bit the same about gardening. The amount of time I'm willing to spend tending the garden is strictly limited, so whenever I spend an hour or two mowing the lawn or pulling up some weeds, I feel vaguely virtuous. But whatever I do in the garden is a wholly inadequate response to this tsunami of green plant life which keeps coming at me; the jungle keeps growing, and nothing I can do seems to dissuade it. In fact the worst thing I can do is actually clear a piece of ground of weeds, because then twice as many other weeds take over and grow twice as fast. There is life in the earth and in the seeds that cannot be stopped.

And our first reading today says something similar about the Word of God. The prophet compares the Word of God to the natural process of rain watering the earth and making it bring forth and sprout, giving seeds to the sower and bread to the eater. And the thing about such a process is that it always leads to new life. As the prophet says, *"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."* The Word of God always leads to life and growth, even if like the rain watering seeds in the earth, the results are a little uneven and unpredictable. And there's maybe a similar point being made by Jesus in the parable of the sower in the Gospel reading: there are all these different kinds of soil in which the seed lands; some of them inhospitable; some of them good for growth; and the sower is sowing indiscriminately, without even caring where the seed is going to land, because he knows that some of it is going to take root somewhere; some of it's going to yield a harvest so rich, it will more than make up for all the seeds lost on the path or among the rocks or the weeds.

And the Word of God is like a pernicious weed: no matter how much you try and get rid of that ground elder or that goose grass or those dandelions, they will keep on flourishing somewhere in the garden - Except that the Word of God is the opposite of a weed: as the prophet says, *"Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle."*

And the passage itself, strangely, is an example of this process. Just a couple of verses further on, there is a promise of inclusion: *Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.*

And it is almost certainly this passage which caught the attention of an Ethiopian eunuch whose story we hear about several centuries later in the Acts of the Apostles. The eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah (probably that passage) and trying to make sense of it. And Philip comes along and helps him to see how the chapter just beforehand refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The eunuch asks to be baptised there and then, and he goes on his way rejoicing. And the Coptic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia to this day trace their origin to that incident, all going back to the prophet Isaiah -

My word shall not return to me empty.

And church history is full of such incidents:

St Anthony, a wealthy young man in the days of the Roman Empire, meditated on Jesus's words in Matthew 19, verse 21: "If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven." Taking it to heart, Anthony gave away his riches and became a hermit in the desert, eventually gathering disciples around himself and organising them into a community and inspiring other communities of hermits into what became the Monastic Movement, with profound consequences for Christianity and for Christian civilisation in Europe -

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Or take the story of Augustine, who was grappling with the question of whether he should become a Christian if it meant having to give up his rather hedonistic lifestyle. And he went into his garden one day in a state of turmoil and confusion, and he heard a child's voice over the garden wall saying, "Pick up and read. Pick up and read." So he picked up his Bible and opening it at random he found the verse, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And as a result, he committed his life to Christ and became one of the greatest Christian teachers of the Church -

My word shall not return to me empty.

Or think of John Wesley going to church in Aldersgate in London, in a state of spiritual depression, and hearing someone read the preface to Luther's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, and those texts in Romans which promise that we can have peace with God not through our own efforts or goodness, but simply by trusting in the grace of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Wesley wrote in his journal how he "Felt his heart to be strangely warmed" as he heard those words. And from that came a widespread revival movement and the Worldwide Methodist Church -

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Or more recently, think of the Jubilee Debt campaign in the 1990s, campaigning for the cancellation of the most oppressive international debts. It was a campaign that achieved great success and allowed a number of developing countries to spend their money on public services rather than on servicing interest on historic debts. But it arose from Christian economists studying the Book of Leviticus, with its teaching that debts should be cancelled every 50 years - who would have thought that in the modern world, the Book of Leviticus could transform international relationships? -

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And sometimes the church today is in danger of taking the Bible, the Word of God, for granted. Sometimes Christians think Bible reading is only for those who are very keen. Sometimes we're in danger of thinking that God won't address me in His Word - well, if we don't listen, we won't hear.

The Word of God is living and active: *"It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the things for which I sent it."*

Reading Texts

Isaiah 55:10-13

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ 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. ¹² For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. 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.'