

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 2020

Isaiah 55:10-13, Roman 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Our current predicament is shining a light on us, a bright light. What kind of community are we and importantly what kind of community are we becoming? I spent yesterday morning preparing for a funeral. As is my custom I was playing music, seeking inspiration: Kings College Cambridge, The Psalms of David. I heard: *Those who sow in tears, shall reap with songs of joy!* A verse from Psalm 126, a particular favourite. I looked through the music the family had chosen for the funeral. Bob Dylan was clearly a favourite, inevitably we heard *Knockin' on heaven's door* and *Times they are a-changin'*. But as I listened to these pieces and read the lyrics my computer played another Dylan song, I heard the words: *'In the time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need, when the pool of tears beneath my feet flood every newborn seed. In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand, in every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.'* It's a song called *Every Grain of Sand* and it caught my imagination.

Tears, sowing, reaping are primary metaphors in the Biblical witness. We are all familiar with the idea that 'you reap what you sow.' Paul, frustrated with Galatian Church in the last chapter of his letter to them he writes: Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. It is a phrase that has made its way into our vernacular. Unfortunately it is usually accompanied but a good dose of finger wagging!

According to the prophets the disobedient Israelites sowed a whirlwind and because of their apostasy were taken into captivity, exiled in Babylon. They reaped what they had sown. However, today's passage from Isaiah, again another favourite, describes their return. This is the closing passage from the second part of Isaiah – the best bit! The part that starts 'Comfort, comfort, my people,' known as the Book of Consolation. In this passage Isaiah assures the Israelites that despite everything, God's word, which he likens to a seed, would achieve its purpose, the restoration of the Israelite people. It is the story of new creation, from condemnation, from the nothingness of exile God makes a human community and calls it by name. From the tears of human chaos God makes a human community.

This is the Biblical background to today's passage from Matthew of the Parable of Sower. A passage that appears in all three synoptic gospels, which tells us something of its significance. Parables are important because they engage us. Jesus says to the disciples about understanding but he means much more than simply understanding in the usual sense of that word. It is not a case of working out what Jesus means but being prepared to find yourself in the parable, being prepared to be drawn into this new world, this new community that Jesus is creating.

Parables use familiar settings – in this case a farmer sowing seed, they can lull us into a false sense of security. Just when we think we might understand,

parables confront us with a different picture of the world, and challenge us: not just "Do you get it?" but "Will you live it?" We might think we recognise the setting but parables are like those strange dreams which are both familiar and disorienting. Parables take us into a new reality Jesus calls it the "kingdom of heaven". And, yes, explicitly or implicitly, all the parables end with the burning question: Will you make this reality your reality? One writer put it: 'finally, the parables are dangerous because they confront the listener with judgement, they sift us, they separate those who will say Yes and take a risk and follow Jesus, and those who will say No and travel by sat nav. The sting is that those who play safe are, in fact, living in a world that, for all its apparent givenness and permanence, is passing away.' This text asks: Are you a part of this new community by asking what kind of soil are you?

The parable of the sower is saying something to us about our vocation. It is a reading of the parable in which we are called to be soil that will bear fruit. We are not called to toil and spin, worry and become anxious, but to be the humus the soil in which God's seed will bear much fruit. To be humus calls us to humility. It calls us to allow others to grow and flourish, it calls us to 'Magnify the Lord', to make God bigger by making ourselves smaller. This is a sign of this new community and its good news.

It's the Good news of the passage from Paul which he heard this morning. It comes with a sense of relief, there is no condemnation. We don't reap what we sow in the Kingdom of God – I for one am thankful for that. Last week we heard Paul's pleading 'wretched man that I am who will rescue me from this body of death.' He answers his question this morning. Paul doesn't suggest that this is all about what we've done, but what has been done to us: so that the just requirement of the law might be *fulfilled in us*, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

We live in extraordinary times, none of us have experienced such events that currently impact on the lives of everyone in our world. Our first response is to want to do something! Dylan, however, in hour of deepest need suggests a confession which involves tears bringing a seed new to life. Our first calling is to acknowledge the nearness of the Kingdom, the new community and repent. We are not condemned but called to recognise God working within us, a sure guarantee that the weeds, rocks, thistles and dryness of our lives will not prevent the flourishing of God's kingdom, the new community.

What kind of community are we, what are becoming? Our calling is one of tears, but tears of repentance, tears shed in faith, will bear fruit. Christ's mission to bring about the kingdom of God is one of tears, it is one in which the cross will loom large. God's word is a word of tears which we need to hear and take to ourselves, if we are indeed deep soil. It involves a profound sharing a willingness to reach out. I pray that the tears shed at this time of isolation and exile will bear fruit in the ongoing work of new creation as we play our role in the revealing the new community that we are called to be a part of. Psalm 126 ends: *they that go out weeping, bearing the seed: shall come again in gladness, bringing their sheaves with them.* May it be so. Amen.