

Learning to Speak Christian

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixth Sunday of Pentecost, Year A — 16 July 2023

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:8-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today's Gospel parable of the sower reminds me of trying to learn a foreign language, in my case French. I needed it to help with my theological research, but I've never gotten very far with it. I made a good start, though—for me, in the imagery of our parable, the word didn't fall on the path to get instantly snatched away. I was interested in getting access to those French texts and I saw the point. Neither did the word fall on rocky ground for me, so that I gave up as soon as things started getting difficult. Because of course learning a new language does get harder, when your rate of progress slows markedly, and it can seem that you're making little progress. I didn't even mind looking dumb in a conversation group, or at least not all the time.

I think that my experience was more like the third scenario in today's parable—the thorn-infested ground in which the word landed and took root but was eventually choked out. I never prioritised my French enough over the long term to get any good at it. I finished that research and thereafter, as far as the French was concerned, I let myself get distracted. I never found myself in that fourth scenario—in that good soil. That would have meant setting out to live among native speakers in France for a decent period, so that the roots of language could reach down deeply and spread out strongly. You could say that I never found my *terroir*.

But if I had, I'd not only be able to read better but to follow the spoken word more readily and to speak up without having to think about everything I was trying to say and feeling on edge all the time.

In that happy state, planted in the good soil of a native speaking community I could have learned and taken part. And even if I'd never ended up being able to speak fluently, I'd still have done remarkably well. For me there wouldn't have been a hundredfold yield, or probably even sixtyfold, but I can imagine having ended up thirty times better than when I started—and of course any farmer knows that even thirtyfold is a very impressive yield.

Friends, becoming a Christian and then growing in Christian faith and understanding is like learning a new language—learning to speak Christian, if you like.

Of course, a lot of people can't be bothered with Christian faith—for them the word has fallen on the path to be quickly snatched away. They understand things sufficiently for their purposes, they're content, they're not troubled by ultimate questions of life, and they may be fashionably hostile to Christianity—like *The Guardian* and the ABC. Others are interested and they join up, but they don't last. For them the word has fallen on rocky ground. There may be some enthusiasm for the new faith and involvement in a lively Church, but then something goes wrong, life's cracks start to show perhaps, and a too-simple fundamentalism can't cope. Or else being seen as a churchgoer makes them look uncool and maybe it attracts some derision. Ask any young Christian who's out there dating. It's easier to go to Church when lots of other people are doing it, but not in our post-Christian societies when hardly anyone goes to church anymore and you find yourself having to justify a minority position. This is a common enough challenge throughout today's West.

As for falling among thorns, we've seen many Christians give in to distraction thanks to the COVID lockdowns when churches were closed. Lots of people found that there were other things they'd rather be doing on Sunday mornings, and their habit of semi-regular churchgoing was allowed to lapse. Apart from which, there are plenty of genuine demands on busy working parents and families that can make weekly churchgoing quite demanding, time wise and energy wise, and I appreciate that. But if we're not careful the competing agendas can throttle our faith altogether. In a few weeks I have to preach at Morning Prayer for a national conference of Anglican School heads and chaplains here in Canberra and, as ever, I ask myself if our Anglican Schools, with their paltry yield in terms of bringing young people to Christ and the Eucharist, are less about finding good soil and more about falling among thorns.

As for the good soil, which I'm likening to a community of native language speakers, the Eucharistic community is where we can learn to speak Christian properly, because here we're at home with Jesus Christ in the midst of his people. Here in the Eucharistic life, where word and sacrament form a community of faith, we're in good soil and we bear fruit. We may not be saints, bearing a hundredfold, but even my thirtyfold is special, and I shouldn't get discouraged or let myself doubt it.

Where would the world be without Christians bearing their witness, living the life of the Spirit rather than what Paul in our Romans reading today calls the life of the flesh—that is, the distracted, preoccupied, fundamentally self-serving life. This is the deathly life, widespread now as then, that Paul warns about. And, of course, the flesh means the turned-inwards natural human state, not especially the realm of sexual sins—though of course our sexuality is every bit as corruptible and potentially venal as any other aspect of our humanity, not serving the cause of life but distracting and diverting us from it.

I like the way our Old Testament readings today echo this theme of rich harvests from God. Isaiah paints a very confident picture of Israel, the Lord's vineyard, delivered from its ruin and established in renewed circumstances. While our Psalm represents a vision that today's world is being tempted to lose faith in, with its fulfilled promise of plentiful water, good climate, and food security.

As for the Church and the Christian life, which is the focus of today's Gospel parable, the good news is that you and I are rooted in good soil, so that we can withstand the challenges and disappointments that make faith inconceivable or else unsustainable for so many. For us instead, even if we're not saints in the hundredfold sense, God has planted us in good Eucharistic soil. It's from here, friends, with Christ at the heart of our life and our imagination, that we yield the good fruit of his Kingdom—and I daresay more of it than we might think.

The Lord be with you ...