

Heaven in Ordinary

[Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](#), [Isaiah 55:10-13](#)

Why does Jesus tell parables? He speaks in riddles, playing with his audiences. He rounds off his parable with the statement, “Whoever who has ears, let them hear.” He is telling stories which are at once filled with situations and people who are very familiar and also very peculiar. The large crowds who gather to listen to his stories must have felt that what he was saying was very simple, but then troublingly complex and challenging.

Take this story of the Sower: a picture of a farmer sowing his seed and only some of it surviving to a



successful harvest would be the life of many in his audience. It was a precarious process, a war of attrition with birds scavenging the seeds. The searing heat of the sun would bake the soil hard so the seedlings could not take root. They burst into life and then withered. Without constant care, prickly thorns would crowd out the growing plants. Nevertheless, some plants grew and produced a bumper crop. Jesus describes the life which his audience had experienced through generations. It is their experience; the real world. So far, so good, but so what?

There is no explanation of the little story for the crowd that has come to listen. What might they take home from the story? What does it mean? What is the message? Was it a kind of “shaggy dog story”? Would they have gone home and continued to discuss its meaning, or dismissed the farmer as foolishly extravagant and negligent, casting his precious seeds in places which were clearly unsuitable?

Might they have seen the soil as a symbol of the situation of

Israel under Roman rule, and how they should be preparing for a great uprising against their oppressors?

These interpretations would enable the audience to feel good about themselves, whether in their skills as agriculturalists – far better than this foolish farmer – or as participants in a new anti-Roman movement, but they are not what Jesus meant. They would be hearing what they wanted to hear.

However, Jesus’ conclusion, “Whoever has ears, let them hear” is not an invitation to be self-satisfied. Rather, he is asking his audience to take his words to heart, to let them take root in them in the same way that the good seed took root and produced a great harvest in the parable.

We have heard this story so many times that we may be very used to it and not grasp its impact. The disciples may appear very stupid at not understanding the message of the parable. Jesus seems to offer an explanation which is so very simple and accessible, where components are given clear parallels, so that the seed equals the message about the Kingdom of God, the soil equals the attitude or “heart” of the person who receives the message. His explanation may be accessible, but it is not simple.

There is a risk that we become like the crowds who gathered to hear this master story-teller in action by on the boat at the lakeside. The story becomes tame, comfortable and comforting. We see ourselves as planted in “the good soil”, those who “get” the meaning of the story. We can then quietly forget, or possibly offer a rueful sigh at the plight of those who might be more like the seed that landed on the hard ground or which grew amongst the thorns.

“Whoever has ears, let them hear.” Jesus calls us to pay full attention, to take his words to heart, to let them take root and grow. The Bible gives us many images of God as a gardener; ever since the creation story and the Garden of Eden, God is depicted as inspiring growth, desiring that his people should flourish. The prophet Isaiah describes the word of God like rain which makes the earth “bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater.” Jesus his only Son came to the Earth so that people “may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Jesus connects everyday human existence to God’s Kingdom. His story is based in earth – literally – but not only does it offer a picture of flourishing on Earth in the present, it also points to a future in heaven. This is not a safe little story but is full of surprises.

Perhaps the most startling and sobering aspect of his explanation of his parable is the message about what really sustains us. The seed growing in the rocky soil is rootless. Where are our roots? What sustains us, especially at this time when life seems so uncertain. This may have been highlighted for you during this lockdown period when we have been unable to gather in church. Is there a call upon me to set some deeper roots in a routine of prayer, of reading the Bible, of practical, generous caring for others?

Secondly, the thorns which choke the seed are the everyday things which continue to preoccupy us: “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth”. (v. 22) Jesus is not saying that we will not have worries, or that we cannot enjoy wealth, but they can distract us. It is sad to contemplate that many mental health organisations and children’s charities are predicting that anxiety may well cause lasting damage, particularly to children and young people, in our post-lockdown future, stifling their opportunities to flourish. How can we model a less anxious presence to others?

It can be easy to find that Jesus’ words are drowned out by the many other words which clamour for our attention. Yet, attending to Jesus’ message leads to huge growth: “a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (v. 23) Applying what we hear to our lives has the potential for great impact. The seed grows and is fruitful, many times over. It doesn’t just sustain us, but others, too. It is a joyful picture, one of the Kingdom of God at work in the earth today and in the future.

The seventeenth century poet-priest George Herbert described prayer as “Heaven in ordinary, man well-dressed”; the point where God meets us in our everyday world and transforms us. It is through prayer and contemplation, taking to heart the message that we hear, that we grow and enable others to do so, too.

Grant, O Lord, we beseech you,
that the course of this world may be
so peaceably ordered by your governance,
that your Church may joyfully serve you
in all godly quietness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.