



The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
13 July 2014

The Seed of Transformation

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Isaiah 55.10-13; Romans 8.1-11; Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

Today in our Gospel we heard a parable that many of us will have heard many times before. The Parable of the Sower. I want us to notice how often when Jesus teaches he doesn't give us straight answers instead he tells us stories. Let's look at the context of today's story. Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is right in the middle of his public ministry: a public ministry which is not simply a continuation of the past but opening up to the crowds who are following him of new possibilities, new understandings of what it means to be the people of God. In the previous scene to today's Gospel, Jesus has been speaking while his mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to him but when told of this Jesus has replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And then pointing at his disciples he has said, "Here is my mother and my brother and my disciples. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

The parable of the sower comes immediately after this. Like most of Jesus' parables it comes out of conflict and controversy. I would like to suggest that the controversy is not just that of Jesus' time but that of the Gospel writers – Matthew's time. Indeed it is also a controversy of our own time. And I think the controversy is this. How is it that we define who we are? How is it that we get our identity or meaning as people? For the Jews this question was central to their survival as a tribe, a people, and then as a nation: they were God's chosen people, called out of slavery, liberated from bondage, and formed in the experience of the wilderness. The concept of all they had inherited from their forbears had been handed on, preserved in the Torah, defended and fought for, safeguarded and passed on, from one generation to another. But now Jesus seems to be challenging that identity, or better put he is expanding the whole notion of what it means to be God's people. He is not saying we are no longer part of our family or ancestral line what he is doing is broadening, widening the human family. He is suggesting that we are defined not by our birth right but by who we are and how we respond to God's call. "Who is my mother and my brother and my disciples- whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Now that may not sound radical at all, but let's reimagine it. Imagine saying to the Scottish at the referendum that you're not Scottish by birth you are Scottish by the way you act, or to the Argentinians or the Germans in the World Cup - that your allegiance is not to your nation but to do God's will, which could actually be very different from your nation's will. Or imagine saying to UKIP that you are British not because of the Union Jack you flaunt but by the way you treat your neighbour or welcome the stranger or outcast in your midst. Or imagine saying to the Government of Israel bombing and killing so many in Gaza, you are not Jewish by birth you are Jews and chosen people only by the way you respond to God's word – the God that commanded you, "Thou shalt not kill". Imagine saying to Hamas or to the state of Israel: "Those you call your enemies, those you kill, are your own mother, your own brother and your own sister." That is more context of Jesus' parable of the sower. "You are not a people defined by your birth right. You have no status, no inherited privilege, no national right to superiority - you are my people only because you are the ones who listen to and respond to my word and do the will of my father in heaven." Can we begin to see how radical this teaching is - how Jesus threatens all our notions of self-defence, status and security?

There is a whole crowd following Jesus. If we look at the make-up of this crowd for a moment we begin to realise why this Jesus is undermining the power structures of his time. This is not rules or doctrine handed down by the religious or political establishment or hierarchy. This is a man from Galilee who is being followed by the poor, the sick, those with disabilities, those considered sinners, trouble makers - even the 'unclean', the scapegoats, the ridiculed and despised are following him. This is the man whose disciples can even be treated like the lepers of the society. And look at how Jesus speaks to them. He doesn't lord it over them like the Scribes and Pharisees. He is on the level - he is with them. So with them, in fact, that he cannot be seen or heard and so gets into a boat and teaches them from there. Not a dais or a platform or a stage - Jesus' stage is on the same level as his audience.

And then Jesus uses a parable. But why a parable? Why can't Jesus just tell us straight? Everyone wants a leader who can tell them the things they want to hear. Don't we want leaders who can reinforce our own fondest held prejudices? Don't we want a politician who can confirm our sense of national superiority? We believe we are the ones who are most deserving of jobs, of work, of prosperity, of wealth, of superiority. We are the ones who deserve the best education and whose children deserve to prosper and whose businesses must flourish. We are the ones who should be chosen and promoted above others. We are the ones who will only tolerate the poor as long as they enhance our sense of benevolence or increase our image as benefactor while not threatening our status or our position or our profits. But this Jesus is doing something very different. He is not telling us what we want to hear, neither is he giving us spin or sound-bites or flattery.

The narrative he tells is not a doctrine or a conclusion, it is a process- a story which contains both what it means to wither and die as a person, or as a people, but also what it means to grow and to flourish. This Parable is not an end, an answer, it is a beginning. This parable is action. It is getting inside of us. This seed is actually buried in our own lives and the lives of our community or nation and if it is not nourished it will quite simply die.

Notice the generosity of the sower. He does not just sow the seed among one group or place. The seed is for everyone. "What a waste of seed," the more competitive among us may think. If Jesus invested just in us, our group, our mind-set, our nation, our colour, our gender, our sexuality, our persuasion, wouldn't he get a much better result? And wouldn't he waste less seed. The sower carries on sowing regardless of the land the seed falls upon. What is Jesus saying? Who is the sower? What is the seed? And what is the meaning of the path where the birds come and eat up the seed, or the rocky ground where the seed quickly shoots and springs up but then dies, or what is the meaning of the thorns which choke the seed. And what is the good soil which yields a hundred fold? Well, in parables, Jesus gives us a puzzle, a mysterious truth, which he invited us to carry away with us. A puzzle which like a rubik's cube we've got to go on working on - trying to make sense of the pattern in the context of our lives long after the cube was placed in our hands. But the thing about a parable is that unlike a rubik's cube it does not have one answer but will go on and on and on disclosing its meaning and truth to you in every context of your life.

Yet unlike other parables that Jesus told, this parable of the sower in the second half is given a key to unlock it. The early church was very fond of allegorical keys which interpreted scripture in a particular way, turning a subversive narrative into something which could be contained and understood. And so in the second half of the parable we are given an explanation of the parable. It is interesting that most NT scholars think that this second half of the parable, this interpretation was a later addition, added to explain the parable in the context of the Jewish tradition Matthew was addressing. The explanation in a way cancels out the purpose of the parable. It stops the parable fully doing its work of teasing out its meaning in the flesh and blood of our own lives. Matthew knew that the parable was a parable for his time. And applied it. That's what we must do too.

So for a moment forget the interpretation given by Matthew and let's ask - what does the parable mean for you and me? Well I am not going to tell you. Or more truthfully I can't tell you. Because the parable can only make sense in your hearing. It is only you, in the context of your life, who can open up the secret of its meaning and hopefully discover the kingdom which yields a hundred fold. Jesus did not leave us with all the answers, he left us with a parable. It is seed which is falling upon your life here and now, and falling on the life of those around you even those who are very different yourselves. What is this seed in your life?

I wonder what is the footpath and the birds which make off with that seed: I wonder what is the rocky ground of your life? The seed that seemed to grow quickly but then withered. Or I wonder what about the thorns - what is it that chokes and kills the life of God in you? And I wonder what where and how God's love finds root in your life - how and where do you provide the space and the depth and the nurture for this seed to yield a hundred fold?

Is this parable for you? Or this church? Or for our community? Or nation?

Jesus leaves us with a story and he invites you to take the story away with you in the hope that in your life that seed will grow and we will yield enough grain for everyone to share.