

Sunday 12th July 2020
5th Sunday after Trinity (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 55.10-13

NT: Romans 8.1-11

G: Matthew 13.1-9,18-23

The one thing that our world has not been full of this year is Joy, sadly 2020 has proved to be one of the most difficult years in living memory, a year that began with Brexit and continued downhill after that as the pandemic threw all our lives into chaos which we are only slowly starting to emerge from. It's true that there has been very little Joy.

Which is why it is so refreshing to hear our readings this morning, the lectionary providing the panacea for our times.

“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 will clap their hands,” the prophet Isaiah promises his people in a glorious description of God's blessing.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” Paul declares to the Romans a stunningly joyful claim if there ever was one. “A sower went out to sow,” Jesus tells a vast crowd in our reading from Matthew's Gospel, and the seeds he flung all over the place in joyful abandon “brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

What we notice as we hear the readings this week is the deep and persistent connection between joy and lavishness. Between joy and plenitude. Between joy and indiscriminate generosity.

Isaiah describes a God who pours rain and snow down from heaven without measure, watering everything on earth in the full confidence that what needs to grow will grow: “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.”

Paul makes no qualifications to his thundering claim about God's free gift of salvation. There really is no condemnation, because "he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."

But it is this week's Gospel text that makes the most compelling case for divine extravagance, and its relationship to joy. Sitting in a boat near shore, Jesus looks out at the vast crowds gathered on the beach and tells them a parable: A sower goes out to sow. As he sows, some seeds fall on the path, and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they spring up quickly, but wither when the sun burns their shallow roots. Other seeds fall among thorns and are choked. Still other seeds fall on good soil and bring forth abundant grain.

The message of the reading is one of hope to the faithful disciples – that even when the results are not seen or evident anywhere, there is no cause for despair. God is in charge even when the present superficial evidence is not obvious.

Jesus seems to be encouraging the disciples to remain faithful to their task and not to get distracted by illusory success.

The parable focuses on what God is able to do in the world through the ministry of Jesus and the choices set before people. Failure is an indictment of the ground and of the sower and not the seed.

The parable may itself be addressed to the crowd and the explanation is very direct and addressed only to the disciples themselves. The disciples appear here to have been struggling with the concept of the use of parables to convey the message of Jesus. They are then challenged to hear how the message directly affects them.

They are called to examine their responsibility for their own reactions. Alongside this is the promise of the wonderful harvest, which God and God alone will provide.

The seed, they are assured, is always productive.

This passage is very connected to the one following in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, the parable of the wheat and the tares. It is significant and reflective of Matthew's theological approach. From Matthew's perspective, the judgment is near and people have one last chance to get their house in order. His Gospel is the one of closed doors and limited time, where there is emphasis on judgment and choosing sides. He is clear that there are consequences of actions, harsh penalties of eternal punishment and the fiery furnace. These all might be at work here alongside the message of Grace and the inclusive love of God.

The term used to describe the method of sowing in the time of Jesus was 'broadcasting'. We are familiar with the term from radio, or television or mobile networks – it reaches everywhere. The term originated in this farming method – casting seed everywhere and it reached, like sound waves, a variety of places.

The sower's broadcasting process was not an economically sound method of planting – perhaps this is the point Jesus is making. God is not bound by the rules and invests in the seed and invites the faithful to cast it around the world in the hope and trust that it will take root in some people.

It is not for us to determine where the sowing is to take place. We are not in charge. We are to carry out the task without evaluating the reception it may have in practice.

The farmer in the parable did not intentionally sow seed on the pathway, or in the rocks, or among the weeds and briars. Seed for crops was valuable and not to be wasted. So why use this method? Instead of working on the broad and fertile farms which we often imagine, there were many poor people having, as they still do today, to eke out a living or an existence from small plots of land disdained by the wealthy who can afford land on the fertile plains. There is often only a short distance from the plots of arable and fertile ground to the rock and weed-infested places that hem them in, or the pathway upon which people travel.

Indeed it is a short distance between places where the word planted in the human mind and spirit may either take root and thrive, or find inhospitable ground and wither and die.

Nor should we think those places of fertility and desolations must also be in different individuals; they often exist within the same person.

The early 20th century American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was astute in pointing out the evil in the best of us and the good mixed with the evil in us. As he expressed it, “All human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions.”

This is one of a set of parables leading to the parable of the wheat and the tares which, like this one, highlights the quality of the seed, and the sower or of those who are the recipients of the seed. The main issue is the faithful trust of God and the message that is God’s alone. God is generous and almost what we might describe as profligate – or in an old fashioned God gives and grants grace and truth and extends it to the outcast and the unlikely.

The responsibility is for us to sow. We are not responsible for the growth. There is an invitation to extravagant, time-consuming action, using an almost hit and miss approach that relies on obedience. We are not to worry about the result; the success of our sowing is not our concern, but that of God.

It is not for us to determine the growth, but to ensure that we cast the seed. Our mission and our witness is what is important, and thankfully we are not responsible or held accountable for the harvest. That is not our concern.

The transforming power of the Gospel is that of God and is not reliant on our abilities or qualities, or on our efficiency or persuasiveness.

We take the message and then it is over to God and the individual who receives it and to respond and engage or reject its power. This is perhaps counter cultural in the era of ‘success’ and attention to profit margins and impact. Instead, it calls the Church and those who are the

disciples of Jesus to be faithful about our mission and not be concerned with what might or might not be seen as success.

The Word grows in fertile soil. The promise of God, as the prophet Isaiah affirms, is sure: “It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.”

In the end, the problem is not our ignorance in the face of this Gospel; the problem is our unwillingness to follow in the footsteps of the extravagant Sower. His carefree generosity worries us. His seeming wastefulness offends us. Why won't he discriminate? Why won't he wait and withhold — at least a little bit? Why won't he privilege the terrain that's more deserving?

Because that's not the kind of Sower he is. Look at him, tossing seeds to the wind with a daring and delighted smile on his face, inviting us to toss our own handfuls across the earth and share his joy. Will we?

Fr Bill Addy