

Sunday 12 July 2026
The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 55:10-13

NT: Romans 8:1-11

Gp: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Pondering about what to preach this week felt like trying to get someone's attention while they are juggling flaming torches, spinning plates and checking breaking news on their phones. Many of us might suffer from 'issue fatigue'. There is so much going on around us. The loss of family and friends, the shocking murder of Ann Widdecombe, the worrying and unstable constant changes of political leaders, the constant ongoing debates at the General Synod going now, whether about sexuality, or Israel/Palestine. I am out of breath. People are carrying rucksacks full of worries for various reasons. Where do we begin? We begin by relating to some passages from scripture today. Isaiah tells us: 'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven...making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the Sower, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth'. And St Paul says: 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. And in the Gospel, we hear that Jesus told the crowds about many things in parables..."Listen! A Sower went out to sow".

The parable of the Sower is quite a central story that appears in all three synoptic gospels. Now, some churches might hasten in their interpretation of this parable in order to show off that they are the perfect example of the good soil. Of course, most of us, if we are honest, are on a seasonal rotation; we might be receptive on Sunday, but rocky on Monday, and thorny by Wednesday. The preacher too might be comforted to know that Jesus seems to expect a terrible success rate anyway. But the churches who are too confident of their success might benefit from remembering the various churches we read about in the book of Revelation. Do you remember the Church of Sardis in the book of Revelation? 'having brought nothing to completion' (Revelation 3: 1-6). They have not finished the task. The Church is being exhorted to action. On the other hand, the Church at Philadelphia is assured of what **God** has done and is encouraged not to effort but to patience. At Sardis, the **words** of the gospel are familiar, and the plan is enthusiastically received; but they still failed. Perhaps their failure is the failure to do with what the Philadelphians have been encouraged to do – to be patient with the vision and the gift of heaven to dominate.

Where does the parable of the Sower fit into this picture? The word parable in Greek, *parabole*, simply means a comparison. The kingdom is like this, or like that. And there are a couple of things one can say about this comparison. First, Jesus appears to speak of the work of God in terms of natural processes – the growth of a seed in this instance. He tells the crowd, to understand how God works there are any number of clues in the world around you. How does God work? Not with dramatic interventions, but subtly, slowly from the very depth of being. He works outwards from the heart of being into the life of the

everyday – not inwards from a distant throne. It's as if Jesus reminds them and us that they know more than they realise about God. But the trouble is that you look and look, and you don't see; you listen and listen and you don't understand. There it is, can you grasp it? In the gospel of Mark, Jesus says that he uses parables so that the people don't understand. It's an irony of course that reminds us of the deepest human problem. Human beings don't know that they don't know. It's a bit like that nice pop song from the 1960s that says, 'it is possible to know all the words and sing all the notes and never quite learn the song'. We can sing robustly but not know the song.

Those churches who like to think of themselves as the perfect example of the good soil, ought to be careful in the face of what the real picture is. So, to our second point then. The parable uses imagery that evoked 'apocalyptic' retellings of Israel's story; it tells the story of Israel, particularly the return from exile, with a paradoxical conclusion; and the story of Jesus' ministry as the fulfilment, but with a paradoxical outcome too. It is not a surprise that the lectionary is connecting this gospel with Isaiah 55, where we find close thematic connections. Isaiah 55 goes back to second Temple Judaism, where the idea of 'the seed' refers to the remnants of Israel who will return when the exile is finally over. Isaiah seems to suggest that the 'seed' is the word. The sowing of the seed with a crop that defies the thorns is a picture of God's sowing of his word. But those who are listening need to be warned, for the final harvest will not come about in the way they had imagined. There is no clear chronological sequence, but different results. It's a bit like the story about the great wedding feast. The party will go ahead, the house will be full, but the original guests will not be there. Judgment and mercy are happening together.

So, the warning is for us too. There have been many different forms of confident and successful Christianity – the Catholicism of the late Middle Ages, the Protestantism of 19th century England, and of course modern fundamentalisms, and so on, even the beautiful and dignified tradition of this church does not speak as clearly as it once did of social stability and control. All of these have given the impression of vitality and durability; all in one way or another have faced their own judgments, which is to allow the gospel, God's open door, to form their whole understanding. All of them have been confident in dispensing the grace of God. It's a warning for any religious tradition that wants simply to show off numbers and influence. The paradox is that we all want to claim achievement when in fact we have failed to bring faith to completion – like the Church of Sardis.

The clue then is with Paul's letter to the Romans this morning. We live under the law, says Paul, all kinds of law. We long to be masters of our future, and so we become prisoners of our past. We long to control the world we are in. And because we are who we are, and our histories have been what they have been, we dig ourselves deeper and deeper into unfreedom. The will that we want to use to conquer the world, is a will weakened and bruised by the legacy of self-love, going back to our roots of the human race. We find ourselves among the thorns, not the cypress, as Isaiah put it. And so we struggle, and as we

load ourselves down with that struggle against God, against failure, we are doing exactly what the parable tells us not to do. We succumb to that great longing to know who is in and who is out, how we are doing relative to each other. But when we do this, we show our inability to believe in the God who shows himself in the gospel: the reckless Sower. The real joke of the parable is the extravagance of the Sower. Any sensible farmer would sow carefully. God, by contrast, seems gloriously optimistic – lavishly scattering grace even where everyone else would say, ‘don’t bother, nothing will grow here’. If this was in university systems, it would look problematic, as you might need what they call ‘impact assessment, and strategic plans’. God’s kingdom thrives despite the complete disregard for efficiency metrics. So, if the gospel is calling the church to wake up, it’s not to fulfil a set of controllable requirements, fixing the terms on which it can succeed, but by struggling to keep the vision of the open door alive.

At this altar stands the slaughtered Lamb who embodies God’s will to bear the entire cost of our healing and the healing of all people. Whilst many feel confused, bewildered by our various divisions today, we have come here this morning to receive his body, his body of life, which this morning, as week by week, we take once again into our hands in the sacrament, the body of life, which makes us prisoners of hope, taking us where he is; for as he said to us in last week’s gospel: ‘Come to me and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light’.

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