

6 after Trinity 16 July 2023

Genesis 25. 19-end

(Romans 8.1-11)

Matthew 13.1-9 and 18-23

For the gardeners among us (and that's probably most of us at some stage in our lives) planting seeds and watching things grow out of them are one of life's great pleasures. There is a sense of wonder that anything remotely green can come from such an insignificant bit of nature, let alone flowers, vegetables and fruit.

Today's Gospel from Matthew gives us a parable, and in this chapter 13 not just one but several parables from Jesus in the space of so many minutes. Parables are very familiar to us, including I suggest to people who are not regular churchgoers. They are the vehicles Jesus uses, in figurative language, to allude to and explain the nature of God, for example the parable of the Good Samaritan, or of the Prodigal Son.

Today's parables are also familiar because they deal with the theme of planting, growing and harvesting. In particular the parable of the mustard seed, which follows on from this week's parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds among the wheat, crops up in three of the four Gospels. Mark deals with the issue of planting and harvesting in a slightly eccentric way; in his matter-of-fact style he makes the whole process sound as if plants sprouting from a seed are a rather secret event, with very little effort being put into it by the farmer, who as it were wakes up one morning to find his crop ready for harvesting – he has no idea how it has all come about, but he gets on with the harvest.

That makes it all sound very humdrum – which it is ! It is just that sort of event which we often take for granted without ever giving God a passing thought. Yet he is behind every good thing that happens to us, whether in

the natural world or in our human one, like the birth of a child. So it is good if we accustom ourselves to remembering how God works – sometimes in secret (as it were) and sometimes much more openly.

These parables of sowing and harvesting are significant because they give us examples of very small seeds producing a large plant; large enough in some cases to have branches for birds to make nests in (and at 11 Seckford Street we were in mourning a couple of years ago; having planted ten runner bean plants in our tiny vegetable patch, we were sad to see that six of them were devoured by snails, who apparently didn't fancy the beetroot plants nearby. The remaining four bean plants are flourishing.). By contrast, on returning from holiday last weekend we were astonished to see the height of the spinach and chard which were still minute when we left three weeks before. Given half a chance small things can produce surprisingly large results.

This figurative language used by Jesus was his usual way of talking to the crowds who followed him. Probably not many of them understood what he was driving at, and we know that his own disciples didn't either, until the message was explained to them later by Jesus. It is a little mystery as to why he was not more explicit to larger numbers of people.

For us though the message is not so mysterious, because we know that Jesus is referring to the seed of faith and belief in him as the Son of God. This seed is planted in each one of us, something which we are often unaware of or choose to ignore – perhaps for the whole of our lives.

This leads us to today's parable of the sower, demonstrating what can happen when the seed of faith gets into difficulty or isn't nurtured properly. It may be down to the company we keep, or the things which happen to us on life's journey, or simply bad luck. Our faith wilts and melts away. By contrast, if we have thought about our faith and are intentional about it and are interested in allowing it to develop and grow, we are giving it an even chance of not just survival, but of something

much richer. This is where other Christians come in, and not only them but also people of other faiths, who can teach us a lot about modesty and humility in the face of a “greater being”, even God himself.

But we live in a world where evil lurks in so many places. At the risk of poaching something of next week’s sermon we learn from the next parable that the weeds in the harvest are the children of the evil one and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. It is relatively easy for us to identify evil, or at least we think so, looking at the world around us.

But how about our own weeds: the evils of our attitudes to people and things. Let’s take racism. Even if we have met and mixed with “people of colour” it can still be possible to regard them as being somehow inferior. However, that may not express itself in words, but in our thoughts and attitudes, and the same may be said here in the UK about our view of social class. Not only do we have to be careful about what we say, but more importantly we need to pray about our attitudes which may have become entrenched over many years. These are the “internal” weeds, which can be inherited from previous generations who grew up in a completely different world from the one we now live in.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans “we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies”. If we allow the seed - the Spirit of God implanted in us – the God of love and justice and peace – to take root in us and to influence our whole lives, then we will be astounded at what we can change with his help – both externally and internally, in fact the one may help us to achieve the other.

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