

Sermon

Sunday 12 July 2020

Lesson

St Matthew 13: 1 – 9, 18 – 23

The ministry of Jesus began in the waters of the River Jordan. At the hand of the Baptist, Jesus ‘saw’ the heavens open, the Spirit of God descend, and a ‘voice’ declare God’s delight. For forty day of seclusion and solitude, Jesus withdrew into the Judean desert for silence, prayer and contemplation. On the shore of Lake Galilee, He called His first disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John - and on a hillside surrounded by a crowd, ‘seeing the multitudes’, He preached His most significant sermon. Though Jesus travelled throughout Galilee teaching in synagogues, much of His time was spent among ordinary folk teaching in the open air.

In our lesson today we turn to one of the most familiar of Jesus’ parables: the *Parable of the Sower*. We are told that Jesus went ‘out of the house, and sat by the sea side’. Before ‘the great multitudes gathered’, the many and varied people from the villages of Tiberius, Capernaum, Bethsaida and others, Jesus say by Himself, alone at the lakeside. There have been many hardships and sufferings endured over the course of the extended lockdown but, for some, there have been benefits. The busyness of our society, economy and personal and family lives has been slowed or halted. For a few months, we started to appreciate anew the beauty of nature around us; we had

time to notice afresh the colour of flowers and the chorus of birdsong. We have also had time to rest, read, be still and allow ourselves to breathe. While some people will have endured emotional strain over these past weeks, others will have recovered from the emotional rollercoaster of their frenetic everyday life. Blessed by the fresh breeze of the lake and the warmth of the Middle Eastern sun, Jesus sat alone.

In those precious moments before people gathered, what was He thinking? Was He day-dreaming? On leaving the house to make His way to the water's edge, did He see a sower scattering seed? For a moment or a long time, did He stop to observe how the seed was being thrown, the sorts of places it landed, and did He pay attention to the behaviour of the birds and with a careful eye note the thickness and strength of the choking thorns? At other times, Jesus observed birds, flowers, flocks, vines, fish, the sea, daylight and night time. However the parable formed in His mind, what strikes me most about Jesus are His moments of aloneness and peace. In those times by Himself, whether on a mountain slope early in the morning at the rising of the dawn or on a road from His house to the Sea of Galilee in late afternoon, Jesus nourished His soul in those sacred, undisturbed moments.

Truly, it is no different for us. We have to close the door of our mind if we are to create space and time, an opportunity, for encounter with

God and for spiritual refreshment and renewal. The American Catholic priest and writer, A H Hart, says that we are to ‘shut the door’, separate ourselves, if we are to have any chance of ‘hearing’ God. For me, the most beautiful, wonderful and life-transforming experience that we do hear is the eloquent silence of God. We are to enter a ‘closet’ of prayer, in which we leave behind the external and internal distractions of the world. Hart writes:

Stillness aims at silencing the airport terminal and shopping mall inside our heads. Inside we find our minds operating like radios set between broadcast signals, on numerous frequencies simultaneously. We have an endless, jabbering stream of thoughts and half-sentences, incoherent notions, verbal fits and starts, sputtering feelings, ups and downs, unwanted memories, and unruly images. Underneath that we have even deeper nameless dreads, strange desires, longings, yearnings, and a good deal of emotional chaos. Fears of mortality mingle with grocery lists; prices for haircuts jostle with concerns for aging parents; sexual feelings interpenetrate the stressful arithmetic of our financial worries.

Hart says that to intentionally create space for the Sacred, we must practise separation and stillness to the extent that it becomes a habit. We can use rhythmic breathing to help concentrate the mind. Like Jesus, we can pause, breathe, ‘take in’ nature and so let the pace of creation still us. Like everything else in life, the more we practise stillness, beginning with small steps, the more comfortable we will be entering into it. The mind cannot be still until the body is still.

Mother Teresa said that ‘God *speaks* in the silence of the heart’.

Before Jesus began to teach the crowds, He stood to watch the sower and *sat* at the sea side alone.

Parables are a familiar means of teaching in the Jewish tradition.

Imaginative, they invite the listener to question and study. In the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Ezra, there are images of God as the sower. The seed is the *word* of God, the *word* of the kingdom of heaven. In the parable of Jesus, the seed or word is sown within us, deep in the subsoil of our soul. The seed is undone by many hazards: shallow soil, stones, the heat of the sun, and stiff, sharp-pointed thorns. Jesus said that the reasons why seeds may not settle, grow and become fruitful may be persecution, the everyday cares and distractions of life, or the seduction of wealth.

For a moment, take yourself to the lakeside where Jesus is seated in the boat. Feel the sun’s heat and fresh breeze upon your face.

Perhaps you too saw the sower on your way to hear Jesus. Now you have stopped, reached your place of rest and are ready to listen. Be present to Jesus; let His voice penetrate and resound within you. As you stand side by side with others on the sand, let this time and place become a moment of seclusion and solitude for you, a sanctuary in which you hear only the words of Jesus.

The soil of which He speaks is our souls. Like many others perhaps, our life is made up of times of different soils; each day and each hour we may be the different soils. At times, the shallower soil in which the seed or word is enthusiastically received but soon expires; the stony soil in which the blows of secular society take their toll ('You don't really believe all that stuff, do you?'); the thorny soil in which our everyday cares exhaust us or our lust for wealth and status entrap us; or, thankfully, times when we are the good soil in which we are touched and changed by the Eternal, by Jesus, and we hold fast to it. Let the parable be for you.

In this extended period of lockdown, when we have been starved of our weekly nourishment, we may have a sense of drifting, of falling away from our church commitment. For me as for many, sometimes the theology of the churches does not help: the 'salvation economy', of working for our heavenly reward, is truly unappealing. Love does not love for a selfish reward. God is our Eternal Lover, who delights in our fulfilment and joy, not a taskmaster ticking off good works completed.

Jesus said that the good soil bears much fruit: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. These quantities are exaggerated; hyperbole is typical of Jewish storytelling. Our relationship with God is one of abundance, sweetness, elation, peacefulness, grace and the deepest joy. The responsibility to feed ourselves is our own. Steal moments

of seclusion and solitude; stop and soak in the beauty of nature; still the body and mind; sit with Jesus in Scripture; and listen to the silence of God.

Amen.