

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 – a sermon for 12.07.20 by Rev Carol Harley

May my words be true to God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Turning to the Gospel story this morning Jesus told about a sower and his seed, we notice that it is set out in a series of word pictures or images, so let's take a look at each one and see what it has to say to us.

FIRST, there is the seed that fell on the path and the birds ate it. The seed is the new words about a new way of life in the teaching and preaching of Jesus.

His words, yes, but also what he was and did. His words AND deeds. The seed is the power of God being sown in the world to transform it, to make new, and the problem of the first picture is that the seed has not penetrated the ground. It's so easy for the birds to eat it up.

At the end of the parable, Jesus says to the people, 'The man who has ears to hear should use them' ... meaning, this needs thinking about, it needs to be turned over, for the story to penetrate the mind, and over again if you are really to get the message, for the penny to drop, for the story to penetrate the depths of the mind and heart.

Image or picture number TWO is of the seed on shallow ground which the sun scorched to death. The thing to notice here is the sun, whilst seeds cannot grow and bear fruit without a lot of sunshine, it is also true that the sun can be a destroyer. The sun is used later in Christian church history as a symbol and sign of persecution, so the meaning could well be that if the teaching of Jesus has not taken deep root in your life, then when trouble comes, WHEN THE HEAT IS ON, you will wither and die.

When I look at the different centuries of Church history, I'm amazed at the courage of ordinary people who, when the heat was on, when they were attacked and brutally tortured because they loved Jesus, were prepared to die rather than betray him. I think of a young girl called Catherine who was tortured on a wheel with spikes (the firework Catherine Wheel was named after her). I think of forty Roman soldiers were made to undress and stand in the depths of winter on a freezing pond with warm baths on the shoreline. If they betrayed Jesus they could have a bath and live. Thirty-nine died where they stood and a Roman Guard undressed and died with them to keep the number at forty.

Or I think of people in our time who suffered persecution, Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian Christian imprisoned without trial for daring to question communism, and suffering many years in solitary confinement rather than betray his Lord. These and many others stood firm 'when the heat was on' and have proved an inspiration to so many Christian people worldwide.

The THIRD picture is of seed that fell among thorns. This can stand for ANXIETY. The worries of this life and love of wealth choke the message. Jesus taught that so often two things come between us and God. One is ANXIETY and the other is WEALTH.

Anxiety: We often worry about many different things: our children and their future; about their education; about our jobs, health, or the world situation and so on and on. Our minds are often so full of worry that there is no place for God. We forget that he is a father who really understands and cares deeply for us all. One who even counts the hair on our heads. So it is that Saint Paul urges us to cast all our worries on him, because he cares for each one of us.

Wealth: I like the story of 2 South Africans who were haggling over the price of a local farm that was for sale. The owner wanted a lot more than the prospective buyer was prepared to pay, so no sale took place. Unknown to both of them, under their feet were the richest deposits of gold in all the world. There was something under their feet far more valuable than an old broken down farm, but it never occurred to the two men to look for it ... So with God and his Kingdom, hidden in the world, but always found by those who really hear the message and search for him.

And so to the final picture, or image - that of the good soil and of the amazing harvest. This last picture is full of assurance for the church, because it reveals that with the coming of Jesus the seeds of God's kingdom have not only been planted, but in the end bear a marvellous harvest, well beyond our wildest dreams. In spite of everything, the Kingdom of God comes and therefore His kingly rule will be acknowledged universally when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

There are many different ways in which this parable can be interpreted, but in the end it does two things:

ONE. It is a parable of encouragement for all God's people.

It says that in spite of many disappointments and setbacks in doing his work through the church in the world, there will be a reward, a harvest.

TWO. The Parable of the Sower is also a reminder to those who hear the Good News of God's love in Jesus that there is a great responsibility laid on them: they must think deeply about Jesus and his message and commit themselves to him and his message. There is nothing wrong with the seed, it will always bear amazing fruit in any human heart that will allow it to.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.