

Bennochy church: 29th January 2017

There is a problem with the familiar. It is too well known. We don't read or listen with the same intensity, as we do when it is something new. The familiar is not so exciting. What can we learn from something we have heard before? Having said that, I wonder if you are you like me, you know you have seen this film loads of times, but you still come across bits you have either forgotten, not noticed or you can't even remember the end of the story! Any good story is multilayered, so maybe it should not come as a total surprise to us, that even the familiar has much to teach us.

The parable of the sower is probably one of the best known parables of Jesus. It is in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke and is the key to understanding the other parables in Mark chapter four. The big temptation, is coming to such passages and skim reading them. We say to ourselves, we know this bit and we jump ahead to see what is next.

Would it not be good to come to such parables and be able to hear them for the very first time? With the best will in the world we can never do that. To sit by the lake. Part of the crowd, hanging onto every word that Jesus said. He said, "*listen*." We will always lose the impact of the original. So may the Spirit of God give us ears to listen. A bridge to spans the centuries. That ancient stories might impact, not just our ears, but our hearts. Jesus says to us, "*listen*".

Parables have been defined as short tales that contain a universal truth. The word parable comes from the Greek word '*parabole*'; which means drawing a comparison. I will come back to that.

Jesus parables were always about the ordinary. There is nothing particularly dramatic about a man sowing seeds. Jesus might even have caught sight of a man sowing on the hillside, which maybe inspired these words. One commentary I read said, it was often the case that seeds were sown before the ground was even ploughed, and so they went everywhere. To me that is not very efficient! But in an agricultural community this was part of their lives. It would be like me taking you all down to the High street and saying, 'Listen, there was once a woman, doing her shopping!' It must have been the way Jesus told them! They seem captivated! Jesus turns the ordinary into something significant.

We have listened. We say to ourselves, that was a good story, but what was it all about? You turn to someone else in the crowd and he shakes his head. There are in these words, at least the possibility, of Jesus own frustrations. In preaching the Kingdom, he knows, even at the outset, that many will hear his words, but will not get the message. The prophet Isaiah seemed to have the same problem! People who looked and looked but did not see. People who listened and listened but did not

understand. These crowds might just have been there for the miracles! Here is the miracle man. Here's the healer. What will he do today? I want to be entertained. They are not listening to his words. You know the most ironic thing about this story? As he spoke, Jesus was casting seeds.

Afterwards, Jesus said to his disciples, unlike the crowd, "*You have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God*". This secret was well hidden, because it seems they had no clue what he was talking about. It is one of the mysteries of scripture. Jesus teaches in parables to hide their meaning. You might be thinking, the meanings obvious, but remember, Jesus did not explain anything before hand , so the illustration and its meaning, is hidden in a vacuum. We have here a little insight to the disciples. Jesus say to them, with a possible sense of exasperation, well if you don't get that one, how will you understand any of the other parables.

As Jesus explains to them this parable, we need to remember It is not just about their ignorance. It is more about how the words of Jesus speak to us. It is about what kind of soil are we? The 'parabole' I mentioned earlier, is a 'comparison' of how receptive, different soil types are for seed; hard, shallow, overcrowded and good and, at the same time says, how receptive people, like us, will be to the word of God. That is the point of the parable.

It is easy to understand the idea of lack of growth on a hard paths or stony ground. Imagine the hardened paths between the fields of Galilee or, where seeds are choked by weeds or, the thin soil layer on the rocky outcrops of the Palestinian hillside. In these places there is a lack of depth. But the point is this, on good soil, growth is out of all proportion to what is sown and what would have been be expected. Much of Galilee, in the north of the country, was not good agricultural land.

Some have suggested that the problem is with the sower and where he has cast the seeds. But that misses the point of the parable altogether. Jesus is saying, God tests human hearts. It is about spiritual responsiveness and openness to God. God is asking us, to see by the vision of the spirit and not our intellect. Understanding begins in the heart and not in the mind. If we fail to see or understand, then the things of God will be hidden to us, but not hidden deliberately from us, by God. The grace of God does not work like that. The grace of God is freely given. It is the responses, that is ours.

This morning what has Jesus been saying to us through the familiar? Have we got beyond the familiarity of the words, and understood Christ's personal challenge to us? Some soil was hard, some shallow, some overcrowded with weeds and some, was good. Amen