Luke 8:1-15 Sermon for Harvest 2020

It’s harvest! The day we thank God for our food, for farmers, for all those who work in the processes which bring the goodness of the earth to our homes. It is also the day on which we tend to use the most farming metaphors and images within our services, and today is no different. Today’s gospel reading includes one of the most famous and well-known of Jesus’ parables – the parable of the sower. If you aren’t familiar with the term ‘parable,’ we’re just talking about a story or image with meaning if I’m putting it simply.

In today’s story we have a farmer sowing seed in his field and then four major outcomes of that sowing. In short, some gets eaten by the birds, some starts growing but withers because its soil is too shallow, some gets tangled up with weeds and can’t grow properly, and some grows well in good deep soil.

One of the joys of teaching using parables – and Jesus does a lot of it – is that they are stories which are tossed out, like the seed, and then the hearer’s job is to work out how to respond to it. Maybe Jesus has a single meaning in mind when he uses a parable, and maybe he doesn’t. It’s hard to know. Even in our story this morning, where we have Jesus helping explain his parable, there’s still room for interpretation. Like, is he talking to those who believe in him about their own preaching and the possible outcomes of it? Or is he talking to the crowd about their own response to Jesus’ teaching? Or is he talking about the nature of what the reading calls ‘the Kingdom of God’? Or is it something else?

For us, one of the best things we could do today, is to try to come at this parable fresh. Many will have heard many sermons about it before – especially ones where we try to work out which type of soil we are – and so we need to be able to approach the story for what it says to us today, not what we were told it said, or what it meant to us before. It may be that we get the same out of it as we did before, but it may be that today we see a completely new thing in this story.

I’m going to talk you through the three potential levels of interpretation I already mentioned, but I’m hoping you are able to engage with the reading for yourself too.

Firstly, I’m going to say that this parable could be all about the importance of hearing and responding. Jesus has been going through cities and villages talking about the Kingdom of God, and this parable, in connection with that Kingdom of God talk, is a parable about hearing and responding. Jesus is pictured as the one who is scattering the seed of God’s Kingdom liberally – telling anyone and everyone – and some people are hearing and believing, whilst others are dismissing his message. Indeed, the middle verses, 9-10, take on the theme that some will ‘get it’, others will dismiss it, and still others will ask for more help. However, the important thing when someone teaches in parables is the connection between hearing and responding.

Every parable is a story, just as many other types of knowing are story-based. The way we hear stories is that we first hear, but then we also interpret and respond. You’ll know yourself that if you read a book, or watch a film, you tend to reflect afterwards, even if only to answer the question – was it good? Would you recommend the film to someone else? We all interpret stories, and for Jesus, in teaching in parables, he tosses out a story, like a seed, and then waits to see what his hearers do with it. If you like, this parable is Jesus’s story about responding to story! He recognises that for some people, they will simply hear what Jesus has to say, and it will wash over them and they’ll never give it another thought. For these people, the story has been heard, but response is minimal. And then there are others who hear and respond with varying degrees of positivity and with varying degrees of commitment.

For us, this story acts as a challenge to the readers to question how they respond to the teachings of Jesus. The response to the story is in fact to respond to Jesus’ stories (as confusing as that is!). The hearer can listen to the story and then find their place within it: Am I the one who lets other things get in the way of growing as a Christian and if so, what do I need to do about it? Am I the one who can remember being really keen on my faith back in Sunday school, or some other time, but now I feel like that vibrant faith I can remember has withered somehow? How can I get it back? Am I the one who feels like I’ve heard this all before but never really asked the question of what it means for me? Am I the one who can celebrate that I can see how God has used my life over the years?

We can all read this parable and find our own place within it and respond according to what we’ve found. The way stories work is that we always have a response – the question is what our response will be. What is your response to this parable and where do you find yourself in it?

Secondly, this parable might be about rejection and encouragement. As we said, Jesus is off preaching about God’s Kingdom and he is sowing his message liberally. All farmers at the time had varying qualities of fields and often sowing preceded ploughing or ‘digging in’ and so this story is a familiar one to those who heard it. For Jesus, to be talking to crowds, day-in-day-out, must have been soul destroying at times. Jesus must have seen examples of each of the potential outcomes for his message portrayed in the story over and over again. There were the people who just ignored him, or worse. There were those who were enthusiastic, but when they realised the reality of Jesus’ situation, they grew cold. There were those who were just too busy to get committed, and there were others who became disciples.

Jesus’ followers were to experience the same mixture of rejection, apathy, initial enthusiasm followed by drop-off, and those who became followers of Jesus. Perhaps this story is setting this mixture in its context – just as Jesus experienced all these things, so will his followers, and that was OK. Jesus, here, reassures his friends that their experience is the same as his, and that even though they will see the seed they sow coming to nothing, there will, nevertheless, be growth in God’s kingdom and that’s what matters.

For us, as Christians, it can be depressing and discouraging that no matter how much seed we feel we put ‘out there’ there is so little fruit from it. If that’s you, this story is a call to be faithful in sowing. Jesus experienced the same issues and he knew the vulnerabilities of his hearers too. We are called to faithfully minister God’s words, and keep on doing it.

Lastly, this parable may tell us something important about the Kingdom of God. We’ve mentioned before that the Jews were expecting a Messiah figure who would come in power to free the people from their Roman oppressors and to bring about religious and political renewal. This is a picture of glory and victory, but sadly not the picture that Jesus, the actual Messiah from God, came to project. This was a huge disappointment and difficult for Jesus friends to get their heads around.

This parable gives us another window into that difficulty and another image of what God’s Kingdom is like. The Jews were expecting God’s Kingdom to be great. Imposing. Expanding. Glorious. But instead, in this parable, we read that God’s Kingdom can be ‘eaten up.’ It can ‘wither.’ And it can be ‘choked.’ God’s kingdom can be rejected and is vulnerable to the response of those who hear. In fact, responding to God’s kingdom is a free choice. One must choose to be the person who puts down roots into the soil of faith and makes it a discipline to get to know God better through prayer, bible reading and so on. One must choose where to place faith alongside other calls upon our time. And controversially, the Kingdom of God is in some sense at the mercy of these responses. Now, obviously I don’t mean that God needs humans to believe in him or he’ll go up in a puff of smoke like a genie! But, the spread of God’s kingdom is something which for each of us can be eaten away, withered and choked. It’s therefore not the kingdom that comes in power and sweeps away all who would oppose or ignore it. God’s kingdom isn’t an imperialistic despotism. Instead God’s Kingdom comes as a small seed which we must respond to. Jesus offers us all a life in relationship to God, but we must accept it. Jesus offers us all freedom from guilt, shame, and death, but we must respond to this offer.

So, we’ve looked at three possible ways of reading this parable, and there are others. The question is really whether you will read and respond for yourself. Jesus offers a place in God’s Kingdom; a kingdom where God has come to us so we can be part of his heavenly kingdom on earth, now and in the future. Please read the story again. Find your own place within it. See what it says to you. And respond accordingly in prayer. Amen.