

**(Romans 8:1-11)****Matthew 13:1-9,18-23****Introduction**

Last Christmas I was given a packet of Heritage Sunflower seeds by my great nephew – who was 18 months old at that time. I was delighted and decided I would have a display of sunflowers along the front of my house. There were different sorts: some very tall, some medium size, some red; some orange and some called teddy bear that were going to be small. I was quiter excited and bought four troughs and some good compost and asked my gardener to prepare them for the sowing of the seeds.

When the family came over my nephew and I took my great nephew out to do some 'gardening'. He enthusiastically dug the holes and scattered the seed wildly in the troughs. He did one trough and after they had left I planted the remaining three in a more measured way. Then I set out to wait,. I was delighted after about ten days to see small shoots appearing and began to anticipate the wonderful display that would grow.

Then it poured with rain and I realized I had forgotten one important thing. I hadn't checked if the troughs had drainage and hadn't asked my gardener to do it either. The troughs were waterlogged , completely afloat. I carefully emptied them and thought I had rescued two of them the other two became dank and hard. I re-sowed the troughs with my remaining seed – and again I waited. Thankfully the shoots appeared and began to grow into strong healthy little plants. When they were about eight inches tall I went out one morning to discover that my visiting Muntjac deer had enjoyed the plants as well. All that remained were solitary stalks.

Determinedly I planted the rest of the seeds I had, bought some poultry wire for protection , carefully and regularly watered them and began again. They are now in good, ground, in the right conditions and have reached a metre high. I am pleased. And I can safely tell you that this story resonated with me as I read it this week in preparation for this sermon.

When Jesus preached he used images people would relate to, probably a farmer out ploughing or sowing in a nearby field as they sat by the lake. His parable is a helpful description helpful description of what happens when God tries to sow the seed of faith in our hearts.

The main focus of the story is on the seed and the soil. The four different kinds of soil receive the same seed but only one kind of soil produces the environment for growth and flourishing. Seed sown on pathways, rocky ground and areas choked by weeds stand little chance of putting down roots. In a short time, it is as if no seed had ever been sown there. It is a

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clear picture of Christian outreach. When we deliver God's word, it is not difficult to recognize the strength of distracting factors in human life – unreceptiveness, shallowness, cares of the world and the lures of wealth. They are not dramatic in themselves but they all pull people away from the calling of the kingdom.

Firstly the sower prepares the ground carefully. then

***He Sows the seed along the ground.***

God sows his seed. In our lives there are all sorts of opportunities to hear of him and meet with him. For some of us it will be in the people we know who have faith in God and show it in their lives, times when we feel the need to come to church and mark an event - Christening, marriage, funeral, There may be special moments of beauty in creation or some special moment when God feels close to us. These are all times when God is planting the seed in our hearts and minds.

The seed grows in different ways depending upon the ground upon which it has fallen.

***Birds snatch away the seed before it begins to grow***

If we have had little exposure to the message of God's love for us we may not understand it. It can seem strange and confusing and before we have the opportunity to make sense of it the devil snatches it away before it can inform us or change us in any way. There may be times when we have felt "there may be something in the Christian message but before we have time to explore it further the moment has gone and it no longer seems important. That is when the good news of God's love is snatched away before we have a chance to consider it.

***Some seed grows fast on rocky ground but as the soil is so shallow it cannot develop good roots so it withers quickly***

For some there may have been a time in our lives when we were really quite interested in religious thing, maybe at school, maybe at a difficult time when God's love seemed important to us. There was a time when it helped and sustained us and we really believed in God but because there was little foundation to our faith it withered away. We may not have had the opportunity to learn more about God or to understand what the Bible teaches us about his love for us and what he wants for us. Because of that our faith and interest in God withered and dried up when things got difficult or when we couldn't understand God's love because it wasn't strengthened by a personal relationship with Jesus our faith simply withered and died.

***Some seed grew among the thorns and were choked by them***

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There are some people who believe in God and want to have a place for him in their lives but there are so many distractions and difficulties: job, family commitments, friends and their needs, the need to earn living, difficult things to deal with and so there is never space to let faith grow and develop. There is no chance for a deeper relationship with Jesus as there are so many other demands upon your time and energy and so your faith is choked and not able to grow.

***Then some seed fell on good soil and grew and produced a thousand fold.***

These are people who hear and understand what God is saying to them and allow God's love to find a place in their hearts and minds. Who seek to learn more about God's love for you and so grow in faith.

We are all in different places. Each of us will be one of the different sorts of "soil" I've talked of. One of the interesting things about this is that we may think that each of us is one sort of soil but for all of us at different times of our lives we have been in a different position. We may have moved from one to another; not all of us of course. Some have known and responded to God's word from their earliest age, and have grown and produced fruit. However, there are times in all of our lives when we are likely to move from one state to another. It is dangerous for us to think that we are the good soil and don't need to worry. Even good soil needs tending, needs nutrient adding and stray weeds removing. If we don't do that in our spiritual lives as well as in our gardening we may find that other things begin to lead us away from commitment to God.

When we hear this familiar parable most of us focus on its reference to those who hear the word and how they respond to it. However, It has another message as well and that is to those who preach the word. Not only was it meant to say something to the listening crowds; it was also meant to speak to the inner circle of Jesus' followers, his disciples.

Following Jesus must have been exciting and exhilarating but there were also times when the disciples may have felt discouraged. To them Jesus was wonderful and exciting. But humanly speaking he had very little success. The doors of the synagogue were shutting against him. The leaders of the orthodox religion were his bitterest critics and were clearly out to destroy him. True the crowds came to hear Jesus, but there were few who were really changed, and so many who came to receive his healing power, and who once they had received it, went away and forgot. There were many people who only came to Jesus for what they could get. The disciples were faced with a situation in which Jesus only seemed to rouse hostility in the religious leaders and nothing but a passing response

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from the people in the crowd. There must have been times when the disciples were disappointed.

So this passage has something to say to the preacher who is discouraged. The message is clear. The harvest is sure. The encouragement is that for all the seed that fell by the wayside or had its growth choked the important fact is that some seed brought forth abundant growth. The harvest does come. No farmer expects every seed he plants to germinate and bring forth growth – as my experiences this year have shown. We know quite well that some will be blown away by the wind and some will fall in places where it cannot thrive; but that does not stop him sowing. Nor does it make him give up hope of the harvest. Growth can be a struggle – but it comes. The farmer sows in the confidence that even if some of the seed is wasted, none the less the harvest will certainly come.

So this is a parable of encouragement to those who sow the seed of God's word. We don't know what he is doing or what effect it will have on someone's life.

*Read Barclay p62*

And also it reminds us that when we sow the seed, when we share God's word with others we shouldn't look for quick results. There is never haste in nature's growth. It takes a long long time before an acorn becomes an oak and it may take a long long time before the seed of God's word germinates in someone's heart. We live in an age that looks for quick results but in sharing God's word with others we need patience and in hope and sometimes need to leave the harvest for the future.

In Paul's words, "I sowed, Apollos watered and God gave the growth."  
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