

Sermon on Sunday 16 July 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Isaiah 55. 10-13 & Matthew 13. 1-9, 18-23

Sowing hope



Panshanger Park is just two minutes from my doorstep, and, for those of you who know it, you'll appreciate just what an incredible place it is.

I never tire of the woods, the lakes, the fields; the blackberries and bluebells; the changing light and the changing seasons. Most days, I walk or run there, and it's the birthplace often of many of my sermons. Lately, on these summer evenings, one of my favourite things to do is to sit with Misty the dog on a particular bench overlooking the lakes, enjoying the view and each other's company, and its stillness and the perspective.

At this time of year, one of the fields is usually shoulder high with barley. This year, however, that particular field has been rested or fallowed. And, in place of the barley, a multitude of poppies began to grow. And then, one day, just as these poppies were becoming

the most breathtaking sea of red, the tractors moved in and cut them all down. Heartbreaking, actually. 'Why would they do that?!' I thought, 'it makes no sense'.

Those listening to Jesus' parable must have had a similar reaction when they first heard of this Sower's unconventional farming methods. 'What a waste!' they must have thought. 'What madman throws good seed onto all kinds of unsuitable ground? It makes no sense.'

Unusually, Jesus goes on to explain this parable to the disciples. The sower is presumably himself; the seed, he says, is the message, the good news of his kingdom or kin-dom. And the different terrains, they are the different responses from those who hear that good news.

I have to say, when I saw that it was the parable of the Sower today, my heart sank a little. It's a great story, of course, but it's always made me feel a bit paranoid, if I'm honest. You see, most days, I'm all of the above. I'm the path (apathetic or oblivious); the rockery (distracted), the thorns (overwhelmed), and then occasionally, on a good day, I'm the good soil; receptive to the kin-dom around me and within me.

The wonderful writer Barbara Taylor Brown elaborates: 'I started worrying about what kind of ground I was on with God. I started worrying about how many birds were in my field, how many rocks, how many thorns.'

'I started worrying about how I could clean them all up, how I could turn myself into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilised field for the sowing of God's word.'

And then something occurred to her; this parable has for centuries been known as the parable of the *Sower*, not the parable of the ground, 'which means,' she says, 'there is a chance, just a chance, that we have got it all backwards. We hear the story and think it is a story about us, but what if we are wrong? What if it is not about us at all but about the sower? What if it is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?'

This Sower isn't cautious or judgmental or even practical. They're extravagant and generous and mad by our standards. It's an example of wild, joyful, indiscriminate, open-hearted, open-handed trust and love. And we, I believe, are called to be likeminded; to live with a similar extravagant and crazy generosity.

Each of us possesses within us the seeds of the kingdom of God; compassion, gentleness, kindness, peacefulness, courage, joy, among so many others. It might not always feel like it, but they're there, within. And the call of the Sower is to scatter that seed to the four winds, trusting that it will settle somewhere and take

root.

We are all sowers. If we sow bitterness, apathy, cynicism, that's what we reap. If we sow compassion, forgiveness, vulnerability, joy; that's what returns.

As we look back upon our lives, we will be able to pinpoint the seeds, both good and bad, that others have sowed within us.

So, for a moment, think back on the good; those times when someone sowed purpose within us, or permission to feel what we feel or be who we are; seeds of encouragement (literally putting courage within); those who forgave us, or lifted us, or believed in us or challenged us or prayed for us.

If those people are still around and contactable, you might want to think about thanking them for those seeds that helped you grow into who you are today.

A sower of good seed sows in trust and hope of harvest. So, take another moment to ask yourself what harvest, what legacy would I like my life to produce? What would I like others to be grateful for, to remember me for?

Back to the 'parable' of the poppies. Weeks later, after they'd been so mercilessly mowed down, I'm pleased to report that the poppies are returning. Cut down, they rise again; a stubborn resistance of hope.

Consider the poppies of the field - from the tiniest seed comes a sea of breathtaking beauty. And these tiny seeds can take root in the shallowest, most inhospitable of places. We have no idea where the seeds of our kindness and compassion will take root and what breathtaking harvest they may produce.

And maybe you're thinking, I'm too old, too flawed, too unwell, too shy to make a difference. Think again.

One example. We live in a barren epidemic of loneliness. And that's something each one of us, however lonely we might be ourselves, can do something about. Smile at strangers, strike up a conversation with the person serving you in a shop, look out for that person standing on their own after a service, ask your friends about the things they enjoy, listen. Each one a seed of a kingdom coming, hallmarked by an extravagant and crazy generosity.

Isaiah 55

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow
 come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
 without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
 so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
 It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
 and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
¹² You will go out in joy

and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.

This will be for the LORD's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever."

Matthew 13

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. **2** Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. **3** Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4** As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5** Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6** But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7** Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. **8** Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: **19** When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. **20** The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. **21** But since they have no

root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."