



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Sixth Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 10

### Year A

**Romans 8.1-11**

**Matthew 13.1-9,18-23**

Our gospel reading the parable of the sower, must be one of the most familiar in the New Testament. We have, I am sure, heard it from childhood and probably could repeat it almost word for word. Familiarity is not always a good thing though and it never hurts to stop and have a fresh look at it.

I like the parable of the sower; I come from a long line of farmers and shepherds on mum's side so I think rooting around in soil is somehow in my blood. Nowadays so many people are divorced from the land. I remember when I was teaching we were looking at Seamus Heaney and the poem was 'At a Potato Picking'. I took in a bag of potatoes gave one to each pupil and told them to have a good look at it. It might sound a daft thing to do but they were fascinated. Some of them had never handled a mucky potato and others just recognised them when they turned into a bag of frozen chips. We got on a lot better with the poem when it was, as it were, grounded a bit in reality. This is what Jesus does.

<sup>13.1</sup> 'That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. <sup>2</sup> Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables,'

The crowds are flocking to him and if he had just stood among them no one would have heard a thing so he gets into a boat, pushes a little way onto the lake and teaches the crowds on the shore. Actually the hills around the lake would have meant that the acoustics would probably have worked in the same way as an amphitheatre. So he tells them the parable, '...Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun rose, they were scorched;

and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!

Many of the people in Jesus' original audience lived lives that involved farming or labouring and they would have had no trouble in understanding at least the surface meaning of the story of the sower. The fields would have been divided into strips with pathways between them for easy access and so that the crops could be changed. This of course was still the case in mediaeval times and that is the way I cultivate my plot today. If you approach Wigginton from Harleston on a sunny day and look towards Faux's fields you can still see the marks of the mediaeval strip method of farming and that always makes this parable more immediate for me. Anyone with any knowledge of farming or even growing food for the family would have no trouble in understanding that what Jesus said was exactly what happened when seed was sown, especially when the method used was broadcasting. People would not have been surprised that Jesus was teaching using stories or parables. Many of the scripture passages they would have known so well are metaphorical and symbolic, that was the tradition. That doesn't mean of course that they are easy to understand, just the opposite. Jesus wanted them to understand it but he wanted them to think about it, to work at it a bit, to figure it out for themselves. Probably the bible passages we get most out of are the ones we have studied and thought about carefully. Jesus rarely gives things on a platter.

There is a piece missed out from the reading that deals with the problem of understanding. The disciples ask why Jesus is talking in parables because people might not understand. Jesus' answer is a quotation from Isaiah about the people of Israel who reject God's word and refuse to listen.

<sup>15</sup> 'For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart.' (Matthew 13)

But then the prophecy continues that if they did turn 'I would heal them.' Literally the meaning of repentance is to turn, 'I turn from sin and turn to Christ.' It isn't that Jesus wants them to misunderstand – if that were the case he would not have told the parable in the first place. If those who listened to Jesus, as he sat in the boat on the lake, really thought carefully about what he said they could have understood it.

It is obvious that a large crowd had gathered. It was because this young teacher was different from the people they were used to, he spoke with authority. Also maybe they had heard he had done wonderful things and they hoped he was the promised Messiah, but a Messiah on whose terms? Many expected the warrior leader who would throw out the Romans and create a kingdom in this world. They wanted a Messiah who would bring salvation to them and condemnation on others i.e. their enemies. That self-righteous way was not Jesus' message at all. They would have had preconceived ideas and when Jesus's way was not what they expected or wanted they would have rejected him. So now that familiar story takes on an extra meaning. That's why Jesus mentions those people in the quotation from Isaiah. Quite often people hear what they want to and don't listen to what they don't want to. If something is unpalatable to them they will do what they wanted in the first place. So many people wanted their image of the Messiah.

When Jesus interprets the parable for the disciples as listening to the word of God and letting it bear fruit, he knows that they have accepted God's word but they need to understand that more is required. He is saying to them, if you hear the word of God and you have chosen my way and accepted it you need to go and turn it into action. It is not going to be easy, particularly when I am gone but that's your job. In other words, do something about it. Jesus sends the disciples out on mission and they are successful because they go with Christ's authorisation and with his power within them.

<sup>23</sup> 'But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.' Jesus has indeed made them fish for people and after he is gone the baton will pass to them and they are the ones who will sow the seed of God's word and bring thousands to him laying the foundations of Christ's church.

Jesus tells his followers in every generation not to be discouraged but be true to his teaching. Not to be like the seed on the wayside which springs up but then withers, or the seed that is choked by other things in life. We must believe in his message, stay true to his teaching and then live it out in our lives, in that way others will be drawn to him. This is the message of St. Paul too.

If I go back again to my years as an English teacher I would often talk of 'the onion'. I would draw a cross section on the board showing the many different layers and write our ideas about what we were discussing by each one. Often poetry and metaphors are like that, the more you look the more you see the layers of meaning within and the richer the piece becomes. That is true of the parable of the sower and it is true of Paul's letters.

This reading from Romans 8 really is the conclusion of Paul's argument in Chapter 7 and the beginning of another which will continue throughout the letter. Romans is difficult, sometimes it seems almost incomprehensible, certainly when bits of it are taken out of context. It is however, carefully planned and reasoned and logically argued. It pays for careful study and time. Paul's layers of meaning may take some digging out but if we wish to understand his writings we need to do just that. It is exactly the same with Jesus' parables.

The first thing to be clear about in this reading is the meaning of 'flesh' and 'Spirit'. This has led some people to condemn all things of our physical nature while saying only our souls are pure. This is to read the passage wrongly. Just look at the beginning of St. John's gospel.

<sup>1</sup> 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... <sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' (John 1)

God created humanity and all that is in the physical creation, 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us.' tells of Jesus' incarnation, fully human and divine. This shows that the former argument simply is not correct. We will look at this later.

<sup>8</sup> 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.'

Paul lays out his argument in the beginning. Jesus Christ died for us on the cross, sin and death were crucified with him. He bore our sins and he vanquished evil. So he won eternal life and salvation for all who follow him. In chapter 7 v12 Paul says, 'So then the law is holy, and the commandment is holy upright and good' He makes it clear in chapter 6 and going on to 7 that the law, given on Sinai

and the Torah are the word of God given to his people, the law is right and good. But, it is not so simple, sin is present in the world; sin which destroys people and God's world. The law in itself can never achieve salvation. Sin is present in all of us and only in Jesus can we be set free.

<sup>3</sup> 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup>so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.'

Jesus was the fulfilment of the law and the scriptures. The law points to him and now Jesus has brought a new way and people are saved through him and only him. So therefore, there is no condemnation for those in Jesus. The Jewish people have been awaiting the coming of their Saviour the Messiah. Isaiah speaks in terms of salvation through his suffering.

'But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.' (Isaiah 53.5)

<sup>5</sup> 'For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup> and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.'

Paul has been writing in the previous chapters about the behaviour expected of those who follow Jesus. When he speaks of the flesh he is speaking of those who follow sinful desires, who put bodily appetites and sinful behaviour before everything else. Now things have completely changed. Those who are baptised into Christ must try to follow his teachings and follow his example. By baptism he says you died to sin and were born again to new life in Christ. More than that the Holy Spirit is within you, you are temples for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit teaches what is just honourable and true. The Holy Spirit of God dwelling within you must be your guide now. Thus it follows,

<sup>9</sup> 'But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'

Jesus has won eternal life for all who truly turn to him. Look at the use of the capital for Spirit, that is the Holy Spirit of God.

<sup>12</sup> 'So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—  
<sup>13</sup> for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.'

Christians have turned their back on evil and have turned to Christ. Evil should have no more sway and people who confess Christ must not be enslaved to evil in all its myriad forms. It is not a simple thing to do and Paul knows it. Each day there will be a battle, evil is an ever present part of life but it is up to every Christian in every decision to ask what would Jesus want of me or what would Jesus expect of me? It is no longer about being motivated by selfishness in all its forms, it is about obeying Christ's teaching. The rewards of following Christ are salvation and new life with him. Paul goes on to say as we will read next week,

<sup>14</sup> 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.'

Jesus has repaired the relationship with God that was broken. We can call God our loving Father; we are co-heirs with Christ and members of his Kingdom.

*Lord Jesus, you are present in the hearts of all who love you. You created us and we are yours. May we live the life you created us to live and remember we have the responsibility of carrying the seeds of your kingdom into your world. Amen.*

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