

Sermon for 16.7.17

Our gospel today is the parable of the sower from Matthews's gospel chapter 13.

And I'd like to say a little about chapter 13 in Matthews's gospel.

To begin, the entire chapter consists of parables – 7 of them in fact.

According to the new Jerome Biblical Commentary, this chapter is the centre and high point of the entire gospel.

Everything is concentrated on the Kingdom. It is the focus of Jesus teaching in the parables.

Now teaching his followers with parables, was characteristic of Jesus.

In this method Jesus brought something of the people's personal life experience, something they could identify with, and held it up against the way of the Kingdom.

Today's parable of the sower, illustrates Gods lavish offer of the kingdom and the mixed responses given to it.

There are four responses. The first is one of indifference of dullness.

Receptive prowess in this response is nonexistence, rather it is like a well-trodden path way through a field that is hardened over time.

Very little, if anything can penetrate the hardness - the seed cannot even find lodgement and is eaten up by birds.

The second response speaks of shallowness.

This response lacks depth and seeks only surface dwelling which soon loses interest and withers away.

The third response is about divisiveness. About having divided loyalties - a foot in different camps so to speak, but predominately in the world order of things.

This response speaks of possible giftedness but of choice for worldly ways over all else.

The last response speaks about transparency and of great desire and openness to the way of God.

There is depth here and fertility and this response bares fruit thirty fold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold.

Now in our life time we may well have experienced all of these responses.

We might say that they have each been part of our faith journey on our way to the response that bares fruit thirty fold, sixty fold and more.

And this may well be the case – but as is the way of the metaphor or parable, its meaning even via precise application is never conclusive.

We can't say after reading a parable for example - ah yes - I know what that means I've sorted that one out – (and with today's parable) - now I know exactly what the kingdom of God is all about.

The very purpose of the parable is to engage the listener - to draw them into an identifiable situation - and then to tease the listener into active thought that pertains to their personal situation. The understanding can change with time and circumstances as can the misunderstanding.

So it would seem, even the teachings of Christ are not enough for us to grasp what the Kingdom is. Jesus Christ's followers of every age must learn more for themselves, by the lives they lead.

Yet when we look further at today's gospel passage, we see that there is more to it than the way of human response. There is - the Word.

The Word, which is inclusive and conclusive. For the Word is much more than a **message** - it is an **event** perceived in the mystery of salvation.

Isaiah expresses the fullness of the Word this way: *So shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

The presence of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ **is** the kingdom in the world, and when the response to it - is indifference, shallowness or worldliness, there will not be much, if any, fertile growth.

Hence I believe the key question is; how then do we hear, understand and accept the Word, in the way that we are called to.

How do we move beyond the ways that the parable highlights?

The ways of indifference, shallowness or division within our interior self.

How does our consciousness evolve in such a way that we can recognise and accept the depth of meaning in the wisdom of the Word in Jesus Christ about the kingdom of God right here and now in the world?

Well, fear not, for I believe the answer is right here in the epistle from Romans, and it's pretty simple - Paul tells us that we are to live in the Spirit - it is the only way, he says.

Paul goes into great detail about how the flesh weakens things and about how those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit, set their minds on the things of the Spirit where there is life and peace.

As I understand what Paul is saying - life in the Spirit is a life in which we live naturally in relationship with the Spirit, whom we welcome into our interior being, to share our joy and to bring clarity to where and how we need to change.

Life in the Spirit therefore could be described as a life of stillness and quietness, a life of contemplation, open to God's Word in our lives.

A life that seeks to have a deeper consciousness beyond the superficial, in terms of our own growth which in turn, by the way we live, bares fruit in the growth of others.

During the week I read something from Rowan Williams' address to the synod of Bishops in Rome in 2012 about the Christian life.

Thus the humanity we are growing into in the spirit.... is a contemplative humanity.... To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts.

With our minds made still and ready to receive, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow. Contemplation...is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity.. To learn Contemplative prayer is to learn what we need, so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly.¹

For me the parable of the sower illustrates Gods lavish offer of the kingdom in Jesus Christ – to respond in fullness is to live the contemplative life in the Spirit.

I'd like to close with the wisdom of Hildegard of Bingen, a Twelfth Century Mystic and theologian: *Without the Word of God no creature has being. God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible. The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greenening, all creativity. All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody, God's invocation of the Word.*

The Lord Be with you.

¹ [1] Rowan Williams, "The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith," 5, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome>.

