

**Parable 10: The Sower (Mark 4:1-9)**

**St Mary's church**

**Trinity 11**

I've always thought that this last of the ten parable windows in church is the most beautiful. I've never heard it confirmed by an expert, but I think that one of the most characteristic aspects of Victorian stained glass is the amazing variety of different shades of green that manufacturers were able to produce; perhaps this is one of the reasons why plants and foliage feature in so many Victorian windows. The image of the Sower certainly shows them off to fabulous advantage, and I find the colours in this window particularly pleasing. The subject is – obviously - the Sower, dressed simply for his work and carrying a pouch for the seed. He's in the process of scattering a handful, and you can see it clearly against the

darker background. It looks as if this particular lot of seed is going to fall on to the path, and you can see at least one bird hovering, waiting to peck it up. The window is not quite so straightforward to read as Jesus's parable, though. The lettering around the top of the picture (now partly faded) looks forward to the explanation that Jesus gives to his disciples when they are together in private: 'The seed is the word of God'. But how are we to read the rest of it? The way Jesus tells the story, it sounds almost as if the Sower is passing through different landscapes – path, shallow soil, weeds, good ground. But in the picture they all seem to be jumbled up together in one glorious riotous mass. Are these exotically beautiful plants in the background all weeds? If so, we must ask ourselves where the good soil is to be found in the picture. One possibility is that it lies on the other side of the path ... in front of the

window ... in the heart and mind of the person looking at the picture.

But the window also presents us visually with a powerful warning. The picture is divided by its abstract patterned border into four quarters, perhaps echoing the four different types of terrain in the story. But each one of those quarters contains the image of a bird, and they're all quite obviously predatory. In the top left quarter there are three pecking birds, similar to the ones in the Dives and Lazarus window. In the top right, there's an owl, watching and waiting. In the lower left quarter there's a long-necked, long-beaked, long-legged bird, and under one of its feet there's a tiny frog, caught by the bird's claws. A matching bird in the lower right quarter has caught a little stoat or weasel. The implication, it seems to me, is that the

Enemy is always waiting to strike; it's a warning to us to be constantly on our guard.

Whatever the person who designed the window had in mind, I think it's a mistake to assume that we must be the people that Jesus means when he talks about 'good soil', just because we're the ones who are here in church. It's so easy to assume that the parable of the sower is directed at everybody else, isn't it? At the hard-hearted, the fickle, the one-day wonders, all those pathetic people who can't stay the course.

I think there's another way of looking at it, though, one that this riotous landscape seems to reinforce; and that is, that at one time or another, we can all be pathways for the birds to peck at, stony ground, weed-infested wasteland. We all have times when we're very poor soil for God to

work with, when it's hard for the seed of God's truth to take root. As well as times when we really are the fertile soil, the fallow ground, where all, or most of the seeds that are planted start to grow.

Let's look briefly at the different possibilities Jesus sketches out in the parable. First, the seed that falls on the path and is pecked up by the waiting birds. When we got back from holiday a week ago, there was the inevitable pile of post waiting to be gone through. Amongst the junk mail, catalogues, bills and occasional, precious postcards there were inevitably some mailshots from charities: would I give money to the victims of the war in Lebanon, people suffering from Alzheimers, medical aid in developing countries? All good causes; but I was distracted. Not only were there the bills to pay and the administrative matters to sort out (bus passes,

communications from the parish council); I was also wondering how on earth I was going to get through six loads of washing when the forecast for the next day was so atrocious. The letters from charities sank to the bottom of the pile, only to disappear soon after under a pile of unsorted holiday leaflets...

The next possible scenario is the seed that falls into thin soil, starts to grow but doesn't have enough to sustain it. Let's do that coming back from holiday bit again. I sort through the post and find the charity mailshots. I'm full of enthusiasm. I've just got back from holiday, and am aware of how lucky I am; my body feels relaxed and looked after and I reflect on how awful it must be for people who are ill. Even more awful for people who have to wake up each morning to gunfire or bombing, who don't enjoy the luxury of waking up thinking, 'Oh goodee, what are we

going to do today?’ So I scribble out some cheques, put them in the envelopes and reflect that although no stamp is needed it will help them even more if I put a stamp on. And as I go upstairs to look for a stamp, I remember my computer’s on and I think I’ll just call up my bank statement while I’m about it. A quick look at the bank statement and I know there’s no way I can send those cheques just now. And besides, it’s important that I keep enough money back for my mum’s birthday and that meal we’ve been invited to the week after next... So the envelopes lie unstamped and unsend on the hall table until one morning in a fit of guilt I rip them up and throw them away...

And then there’s the seed that fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. Let’s rewind the tape again. I hate coming back from holiday. I always feel flat and

depressed. The house is a mess and there’s six loads of washing to do and it’s raining. I’ve got no money and the fun of going away is over for another year. The children are fed up because they’ve got to go back to school, there are all those name tapes to sew on and good heavens, the Christmas catalogues are arriving in the post already. I feel cross and tired and I can’t see the point of anything. It’s almost enough to make you not want to go away on holiday. So why should I think about other people? Why should I be charitable and generous when nobody else bothers? I’d rather just spend my money on me; buy something nice to cheer myself up...

The bit about the fertile soil is obvious, isn’t it, and yes, I do have my good days too. But I’d like to leave you with another thought. Earlier this year, Jonathan and I decided we’d like to grow sunflowers. We bought a packet of seed

and spent a happy hour in the back garden putting compost into pots and planting seeds. We watered them and left them in the garden room where they'd catch the spring sunshine. And absolutely nothing happened. Eventually one or two rather spindly plants appeared and tried half-heartedly to grow. We planted a second batch, and the same thing happened. If Jesus were telling his parable today, I wonder if he might add a fifth possibility: the seed that had all the right conditions but still didn't grow? It seems to me that might be an appropriate image for our society, for people who are just too affluent, too successful, too cushioned against life's needs to be open to God's word. Whose radios are tuned to a different frequency; who just don't have the ears to hear.