

Readings for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

16th July 2023

First Reading: Genesis 25:19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?' So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.' When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Second Reading: Romans 8:1-11

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 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, 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. 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. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

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. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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.

Gospel: St Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen!

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 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.'

A Reflection for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Our Gospel reading today is, for many of us, a familiar parable. The farming images it uses would have been commonplace for Jesus' original audience in an agrarian society and remain so for us today. A few of us are crofters or farmers, we live in a rural area, we see images, and we may also grow things in our gardens.

When I moved into my house in Gairloch almost twenty years ago, the garden was a piece of unimproved Scottish hillside bog that had been roughly levelled off by the builders. Over the years, I have worked at the ground, trying to improve the soil and work out what will grow there. I know all about rocks and seem to have moved mountains. I know all about weeds that attempt to choke out the little plants and trees I have tried to nurture. I have a bird feeder which scatters seed on the gravel beneath that the birds, unlike those in the parable, seem to be rather slack at tidying up while all too keen to scavenge for my carefully planted vegetable seeds in the good soil nearby.

Now, in the past three years, I have embarked on the challenge of the church garden in Ullapool where there is really good soil but also plenty of thorns, weeds and rocks. And I am suspicious of a neighbour's chicken for the loss of my few strawberries this year! These things are all as much part and parcel of growing things as the beautiful flowers and delicious fruit and vegetables that we enjoy from a well-tended garden. We are learning that growing things is about working in co-operation with all of God's good creation.

For Jesus' original audience, these 'growing' images were also common metaphors for teaching used by the rabbis, the sower being the teacher, the seed being what was taught and the soil the students. And Jesus certainly uses this and other parables for teaching. One of the features of parables is that they can be understood at many levels. We need to interrogate them to try to learn from their depths. As it says in verse 9: "Let anyone with ears listen!" It is more than just listening to the words. We need to hear and understand.

In this parable, we need to think about who the sower represents, and the seed, and the field or soil. And what about the harvest? What is Jesus trying to tell us about these things? And where do we fit in? What are the implications for our lives that he is trying to teach us?

Unlike many of the parables, this is one for which Jesus offers an explanation. The seed, he says, is the word of the kingdom. The word 'kingdom' appears fifty-three times in Matthew's Gospel, most frequently as 'the kingdom of heaven'. John the Baptist proclaimed: 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.' Jesus proclaimed the same, as did the disciples when they were sent out. The Beatitudes tell us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit and those persecuted for righteousness' sake. It is that time when all shall live according to God's will, in love and peace with one another and all creation, a time or place of abundance, as we shall hear in the coming weeks in more of the parables.

In his own ministry, Jesus sowed that seed generously, like the farmer in the parable, proclaiming God's kingdom and showing God's power and love. It is a free gift he shared with whoever would receive it. Such gifts from God are priceless and to be cared for, but Jesus' ministry met with a mixed reception. So it is that his explanation of the parable focuses on the soils, representing the different responses. Perhaps it should be called the parable of the soils. As Christians, we naturally want to associate ourselves with the good soil, bearing the grain thirty, sixty or a hundred-fold. But it's a tough calling to be good soil. We have to hear and understand God's word, the gift we are given. If we don't, it is like the seed that the birds ate. Hearing and understanding are not always easy. We have to stick with it when things are tough, or it is like rocky ground where the plant withers – not easy either. And we cannot let the charms and cares of the world get in the way, the weeds that choke our faith. Still not easy. We can probably all think of various times in our lives when we have been each of these soils. Perhaps it is significant that Jesus gives three examples of poor conditions for the seed to grow for the one good one. It's a tough calling to be good soil.

But maybe, we are also like the seed. Is it really the parable of the seed? As Christians, we are seeds that God has planted in the circumstances of our lives and we have the responsibility to grow and bear fruit. We have to seek out the good soil, like a plant putting out roots that seek the best nutrients and the water. We need to seek out those people, places and practices that sustain us and help us to grow, and try not to be diverted by those that have the opposite effect.

Then there is the harvest, the fruit we should bear. Fruit always reminds me of the letter to the Galatians, where there is that wonderful list of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Something to aspire to. But Matthew's Gospel has a different harvest in mind. At the end of the Gospel, the risen Christ says: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.' Jesus, the sower of the kingdom of heaven, has passed the task on to us. Our harvest, the fruit we should bear, is to become the sower, to continue to sow the seed generously as he did, to share the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, if being good soil is tough, so is being seed that bears an abundant harvest, and so is being a generous sower. And, if it all seems too difficult, this is where Paul, in his letter to the Romans, can help us. Last week, we heard all about his very human struggle of doing the evil he doesn't want to do, and not doing the good he intends. In today's passage we have a resolution of that tension. In the first verse he says: 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' And later: 'If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness'. In other words, we may often get things wrong because we are human, but we have the gift of the Spirit of Christ in us who not only helps us to achieve more than we might ever imagine is possible but also makes up the difference where we fall short.

In the parables, Jesus uses the ordinary things of life to speak to us about the things of eternity. The kingdom of heaven is a God-given gift we have, to care for and nurture.; to live in love and peace with others and all God's creation to the best of our ability. Jesus shared that gift with some unlikely people and showed that it could turn them into good soil, in which the seed could grow and bear a good harvest. It is like my rather unpromising piece of hillside bog in Gairloch, parts of which have become quite a nice garden in the past twenty years, and the new vision for the garden in Ullapool. They are both a work in progress ... like all of us.