

An unfamiliar tale

On the first day of each term at my secondary school, the headmaster read the Parable of the Sower at the start of the school assembly. Hearing this story every term for five years made it so very familiar. Perhaps over-familiarity has made me not like the story very much; perhaps also, I have assumed that I know what it means. So, I find it hard to engage with the story with a freshness that may reveal more of its significance. I often wondered why the head read it each term. It may be that he thought that the types of soil into which the farmer sows the seeds related to the types of behaviour that he endorsed. The seed that fell on the path: "Concentrate on your work, boys" (for I went to a single-sex school). The seed that fell on the rock: "Keep trying unto the very end". The seed that fell among thistles: "Don't be distracted by worthless trifles". And the seed that fell on good ground – well, it was fairly obvious that that was what we were meant to be. Herein lies my main puzzle.

There is nothing in the parable that suggest that the soil can choose what sort of soil it is meant to be. There is no choosing. And yet, the interpretation that fitted a headmaster addressing hundreds of boys was: "If you concentrate, if you persevere, if you focus on what really matters, then a rich harvest will be yours". But there is no "if" in the parable.

Jesus was a prophet of the Kingdom of God. Many of his stories direct our attention to what God can do – indeed, what God will do in God's own time. And the harvest of God's work is likely to exceed and excel our wildest dreams. That, after all, is how this parable ends: one seed is planted, but the harvest is 30, 60 or even 100. If the parable is chiefly about what God can do, where do we fit in?

Perspective A: God is the Sower. We know – we experience within our own mediocre lives – how many ways there are that God's purposes can be thwarted. But look – the parable says – God will triumph; the harvest will be enormous. The response expected from those listening to the parable is to have confidence that 'God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year'.

Perspective B: we are the Sower. We are not to be miserly in our sowing. Just look at God's generosity, extravagance and readiness to have faith in us, even when all indicators are that we may fail. If that is God's attitude, then ours should be the same. Don't only sow on good soil – spread your seed far and wide. After all, the pattern of farming in Jesus's day was for the farmer to sow first, and then to plough. It may be that the plough turns the footpath into good soil – it may be that the plough uproots thistles and knocks away stones. We are not to judge in advance. Sow widely, work the soil – and let God produce the harvest.

On Wednesday this week, I will be telling (or, re-telling) this parable to Holy Trinity School in their assembly. My hope is that I can find a way so that they hear this story and are filled with confidence, hope and excitement about what is possible, with God in charge of the harvest.

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