

Romans 8. 1 – 11

Matthew 13. 1 – 9, 18 – 23

Fr Alex

You know it's said that if you have to explain why a joke is funny, then it probably isn't a very good joke. There's a sense in which parables function in the same sort of way.

Normally when Jesus tells a parable, he doesn't give a neat explanation afterwards; you're left hanging, and that's kind of the point. Parables exist to unsettle us, to get us thinking; they force us to look at things in a different way. They often defy a clear explanation. And woe to the preacher who tries to give one!

But today Jesus *does* give the explanation to his parable. So is that me out of a job, then? No further comment needed? That would be a short homily, even by my own standards.

Jesus' explanation, in fact, still leaves us with quite a few questions. Which kind of seed are *we*; the ones that fall on the good soil, or bad? Are we the seed at all, or are we the soil; rocky, thorny, or providing the perfect conditions for growing?

What does that mean—that some people will just find faith easy, and some will find it hard or impossible? Is that really how God operates?

And why does the sower waste three quarters of the seed on the poor ground, knowing that it's going to be choked and stifled? Shouldn't it have all been given only to the good soil?

I'm not going to try to answer all these questions—as I said, that isn't really the point—but I want to focus on one way in to this parable that I've found helpful.

A Biblical scholar named Mary Ann Tolbert talks about this parable as it appears in the Gospel of Mark. She believes that it functions as a kind of narrative key to the Gospel; that it describes the different categories of people that Jesus will meet in his earthly ministry.

For example, the seeds on the path represent those who simply reject Jesus outright. The Pharisees and so on.

The seeds among thorns are those like the rich young man, who is drawn to Jesus and recognises in him wisdom and power: but his love for his wealth keeps him from following him.

Tolbert cites Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, as an example of the seed in the good soil. The last person Jesus meets before his entry into Jerusalem on his way to the Passion; he "springs up" and comes to Jesus; Jesus says that "his faith has made him well," and he regains his sight and "follows him on the way."

So far, so obvious. But what about the seed that falls on the rocky ground? Perhaps surprisingly, these are the disciples, and especially Peter. Their initially enthusiastic

acceptance of Jesus turns to fear and anxiety as they meet with trouble. Think of Peter denying Jesus three times.

It's a pattern in Mark's Gospel for the disciples, who find success in their mission at first, but all eventually fall away at the end.

Of course this isn't an explanation of the parable, but another way in to what it might mean for us. And if Mary Ann Tolbert is on to something, it challenges the usual preacher's conclusion that we are simply to be like the seed that falls on good soil; or indeed the good soil itself.

Because if we think about it, seeds don't have any choice in where they land; if they happen to fall on the wrong sort of ground, they can't very well get up and move to a better place by themselves.

And it's similarly impossible for poor quality soil just to change itself and become better. It requires long-term intervention to improve for the best growing conditions.

Sometimes you can't change the soil at all; as any gardeners know, if you have clay, for example, you just have to plant things that like the clay.

So are we really being called to the same impossible tasks in our own life of faith? What do we do if we're not fortunate enough to be in the right place, in the perfect conditions, all the time?

One of the challenges to us, perhaps, is to look again at those situations and those categories of people—even those parts of our own life—that we write off as incapable of bearing fruit. And to remember that Jesus *still* goes and sows seed there—a whole three quarters of the seed, in fact—even if it looks to us as though it's going nowhere.

Jesus chose those particular disciples to follow him, *knowing* that they would fail time and time again; yet he still chose them. He put his faith in them; and with each little failure, they were enabled to grow closer to him, and into what he had called them to be and do. Eventually, they bore the most incredible fruit, in their mission to the world.

Often we operate from a position of scarcity. We think we have to become part of the lucky 25%—or, in our society, more like the 1%—the 'Good Soil Club' who have the wealth, the stuff, the best opportunities; or whatever that looks like in our own situation. And if we don't make it, then we've failed.

But God's provision is one of abundance; God looks at and cares not just for the 25%, but the whole 100% of all that he has made in love.

I find great comfort in this parable, because if we happen to find ourselves in rocky ground or choked among thorns, as we will no doubt be from time to time in life; it tells me that God can still bring the most wonderful growth from that situation, like he did for those rocky disciples.

He still tends and nurtures the seed of faith that he has planted within us; and what looks to us like hopeless conditions for flourishing, are in fact an opportunity to surrender our instinct to try to do everything on our own strength, and instead rely on his grace, and his care.

It is only with God that we can become truly good seed, good soil; and bear the good fruit.

I know I've already asked lots of unanswered questions in this talk today, but I'll leave you with a few more. As we dwell with this parable through this week, we might like to ask ourselves: where are the thorny or rocky places of our own lives? What do we write off as incapable of growth? Where might Jesus actually be planting seeds in hidden, surprising places? And how can we work with him to tend and nurture them? Amen.