

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 16, 2023

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

+

The Parable of the Sower

“There was once a sculptor who worked hard with hammer and chisel on a large block of marble. A little child who was watching him saw nothing more than large and small pieces of stone falling away left and right. He had no idea what was happening. But when the boy returned to the studio a few weeks later, he saw, to his surprise, a large, powerful lion sitting in the place where the marble had stood. With great excitement, the boy ran to the sculptor and said, ‘Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?’”

In the coming three weeks, we will hear Jesus speaking in parables to the crowds and the disciples are puzzled why he is not teaching in the way that he had taught them in the Sermon on the Mount. The compilers of our lectionary omit those important verses, but Jesus says that he is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah:

“The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’

*...For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”* (Matthew 13:13-15)

We know that many of the people who listened to Jesus did not necessarily agree with his teaching or his manner of life; others were more concerned about seeing something miraculous – if you like, being entertained. Still others were hostile to him and kept a close eye on him – this was true particularly of the priests, the pharisees, and the scribes or lawyers. It is easy to think that the crowds that followed Jesus were the emerging Church; far from it! As we know at the time of the arrest of Jesus, most of the crowd was clamoring for his blood. Therefore, we should take at face value the words of Jesus that he deliberately chooses to use parables to perplex and to hide the message.

It is also the case that many of us were taught as Sunday School that the parables are allegories - stories where you can take the various people, places, and things that make up the story and simply replace them with other people, other places, or other things to explain the story. But whilst Jesus does use allegories, his parables are more complex and as much about the use of metaphor than allegory. Like the boy watching the sculptor, his parables require an exploration of the various levels of understanding until a remarkable truth is revealed *“Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?”*

The Parable of the Sower is often interpreted as a story about individual responses to the Gospel, about how **I**, as a follower of Jesus, use the gift of the seed of the Word of God given to **me**; however, see the seed as the community of faith – as Israel – and the parable takes on a quite different meaning.

Jesus is sitting in a boat on the lake, teaching the crowd, [there is a wonderful unfinished and huge painting by Stanley Spencer of Christ preaching at Cookham Regatta, on the River Thames in Oxfordshire, wearing a straw boater and sitting in a rattan chair, while people go about their business. ¹.]. Now, note that Jesus does not use imagery in the parable that would seem the most obvious; fishing, fish, fishermen, or boats, or the seashore, or even water! Instead, he chooses an *agricultural* theme, the significance of which would not have been lost on his hearers. The prophets often described Israel in agricultural terms such as the seed, or the field, or the plant, or the vineyard. Look at today's first lesson from Isaiah; it is God who is the Sower in spite of the exile to Babylon. God sows the seed even during the exile but the prophet knows the stubbornness of the people, and how easily they could be distracted and fall away from the Lord. But the seed that God sows is powerful and, although much of it will be wasted, it will produce growth - growth will be truly remarkable: "...*Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.*" In a similar way we heard Isaiah use the wonderful metaphors of the mountains and hills 'bursting into song' and the trees of the field 'clapping their hands.'

So, when Jesus gives the interpretation of the Parable to his disciples, he was most likely speaking of the people of Israel rather than individuals. He was also reminding them that preaching the Kingdom is hard, and people are often unreceptive as the prophets of old discovered. Ultimately, Jesus is teaching his disciples that he, himself, is the Sower, and that if they follow in his footsteps, they should not be surprised at the amount of waste – so much seed that does not germinate, or withers, or is choked to death. Was this not the case with Jesus' own ministry? As God's agent, God's Sower if you will, so many were unable to recognize Jesus; so few were able to realize that God was, again, calling his people back to himself. N.T. Wright puts it very simply; he says that this parable "*tells the story of Israel, particularly the return from exile, with a paradoxical conclusion, and it tells the story of Jesus' ministry, as the fulfilment of that larger story, with a paradoxical outcome,*"² which, of course, takes me back to my sermon of two weeks ago and the prophetic ministry of Oscar Romero whose final sermon was, paradoxically, about the grain of wheat that needed to *die* in order to produce a rich harvest.

We live in a world where individualism is encouraged; where fulfilling my own needs is what matters. During the pandemic, this became acute because of social distancing, and the fact we had to close the doors of our places of worship. Let's be honest, it is sometimes easier to worship remotely these days than take the trouble to go to church and sit with some of the people we don't really get on with! The struggle for us now, as we approach our Bicentennial, is how to become a new kind of community in a post-pandemic world; how to sow the seed that Jesus still wishes to be sown. The Parable of the Sower is the first of a whole series of parables known as the Parables of the Kingdom, that speak to us not simply as individual followers of Jesus, but to our community of faith, and how that community will proclaim the Kingdom of God. So there can be no misunderstanding, Jesus is *not saying* that the Church is the Kingdom of God, but that the Church, flawed as she is, has the task of proclaiming that Kingdom to all. As Jesus suggested to his disciples in the Parable of the Sower, much of our work may very well be wasted, but some of it will come to fruition, and like the prophets of old, Jesus says that will be truly remarkable. If the Parable is also about the life and ministry of Jesus, the Sower, then we recognize that to the eyes of the world, that life and ministry was wasted – but in dying to the eyes of the world, it bore much fruit. Jesus said to his disciples, "*Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*" (Matthew 13:16,17)

¹. See <https://stanleypencer.org.uk/collection014/>

². N.T. Wright – 'Jesus and the Victory of God' (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 2)