

The Parable of the Sower

Trinity Chapel, 6th week, Trinity Term 2008

Jesus' practice of speaking through parables surely presents one of the more intricate riddles of Christianity. So much so that by the time the gospels were written there already seems to have been some considerable confusion about it. Thus we are told in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus spoke in parables in order that those who heard them would not understand his message about the Kingdom of God. Yet if Jesus had intended the larger world to remain ignorant about his mission there must have been more effective ways of achieving this than the use of parables. He could, for example, not have preached at all. And if all his followers had been convinced that the parables were intended mainly for those outside their faith, it is doubtful that so many of them would have found their way into the gospels which were, after all, collected for use by the Christian community itself.

We understand this rather extraordinary claim, I believe, once we recall the utter frustration that must have resulted from the recognition that the good news announced by Jesus of the coming of the Kingdom of God, while being accepted by some, failed to sway many others who had equally heard him. That a word is spoken but not received by those who hear it is a sobering experience many people have made: prophets and politicians; military commanders and diplomats; preachers and teachers. If the word, however, is not just any word but *the* word that is supposed to change the course of history and effect most fundamental changes in those who hear, and open up to, its message, then this, it would seem, demands an explanation.

Such an explanation, the early Christians thought was contained in the parable of the sower, through which Jesus himself seemed to have indicated that only those with the right disposition to hear him would receive his gospel. They were right, I think, in seeing this parable as something like the parable of parables, a story told specifically to illustrate the dissemination of Jesus' message. This is why we find it now at the very beginning of a lengthy collection of various parables. I am not so certain, however, that they were equally right in thinking it had been told by Jesus primarily to explain why so many would not and could not receive him.

The parable of the sower, as every parable, is an invitation to see; it conjures up a visual image, and it relies on the power of that image or sequel of images for its message. So what do we see when we follow the words of the parable? We see a person doing her work: the sower sows the seed. There appears to be nothing extraordinary about that. A human practice is pointed out to us that has existed for thousands of years and is very much part of the ordinary life of an agrarian society. We see drudgery and toil, the haphazardness of success and failure characteristic of every human endeavour. Much work is done, much effort is invested, and a fair share of it would seem to be wasted.

Yet there is also hope that not everything is done in vain. In fact, the end result may be such that it ultimately justifies all the hard work, undoing and reversing all prior experience of failure and disappointment. Whether this hope is fulfilled or not, however, one does not know before the end, and this may well be the extraordinary thing about the sower: that he is prepared to stake his existence, year after year, on such a risky and uncertain venture, that he spends his time, strength, and economic resources

on something the outcome of which he can never anticipate with certainty.

Attempts to understand this parable have often been focussed on the question of who the sower is and what he 'sows'. Is he Jesus himself during his earthly ministry, tirelessly planting the seeds for the coming Kingdom of God in the face of resistance and ridicule? Is he, as some church fathers thought, the cosmic Christ planting the seeds of reason across the world? Or does he signify each single one of us going about our daily business of working or studying caught between hope and despair; excitement and boredom; expectation and resignation?

More important than this, however, may be the question of *what* we see in this person and his work. Do we perceive a ridiculous old man who has not yet come to understand the hard facts of life or learnt how to become wealthy? Do we find him brave and heroic in the face of a cruel and meaningless world? Or do we perceive wisdom in his persistence with an activity, which, in spite of all that is wasted and lost, has kept him and his family alive for years, as is has those of his father and grandfather before him?

Characteristically, the story does not provide answers to these questions. It is therefore, in many ways, the individual reader or hearer of the parable, each of us, who must decide which answer we deem most plausible. This decision in turn will, actually, betray rather much about who we are and how we perceive of ourselves and of the world around us. In this sense, parables may be called mirrors of our own personalities, and herein lies much of their power. They necessitate a response of the reader that will vary from person to person, and it is through this response that these stories tell us something about who we, each of us, are.

Does it matter, then, what our understanding of the parable is? Very much so. It matters as much as it makes a difference whether we have an optimistic or a pessimistic worldview, whether we are able to see meaning, beauty, and goodness in the world, or whether these seem to be entirely absent from it. Jesus' message is not indifferent in this regard, and his parables are not either. He speaks about the Kingdom of his Father, which is already here if only one has eyes to see it, and his parables are therefore meant to open our eyes to its reality and presence in this world. We are meant to see that the work of the sower bears fruit as does the ministry of Jesus himself, and we should have confidence that our own lives are not spent in vain either. Parables are there to educate us precisely in the art of seeing the world in this way. In this sense they will always ultimately have to speak for themselves. Let me therefore finish by reading this brief text to you:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Amen.