

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	12 July 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Sixth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

In today's gospel reading we hear of Jesus sitting in a boat of the Sea of Galilee, and telling the crowds a parable that reflects the rural context of his rural ministry in the Galilee region. It is in fact almost the paradigm – the model – of a parable: the parable of the sower. A sower, he says, goes out sowing his seed, which falls on different types of ground. Some falls on the path where the birds come and eat it up; some on rocky ground where it sprouts quickly but does not properly take root. Some on thistles where it grows but is choked, but some is sown on good soil where it grows up and is fruitful.

Jesus explains to his disciples that this parable is about the way that people receive the word of God that is sown in our hearts. The different sorts of ground represent the different reactions that people have as that word is sown.

The stony ground, for example, represents those who take the common approach to questions of religious faith similar to that of Rhett Butler in the film *Gone with the Wind*: 'frankly my dear, I don't give a damn'. For others, it's a nine-day wonder: they seem to be receptive but when difficulties come – and they always do come – they give up. For others they hear the word of God and understand it and it yields a harvest a hundred-fold, sixty-fold, thirty-fold.

Since each of us is that field into which God sows his word, the parable encourages us to look into our own hearts,; to think 'which

kind of soil am I?' 'How can I prepare my heart to receive that which God is sowing in me?' Just a few thoughts...

First of all, we might think about depth. When we hear the parable, we realise that good soil where things can really grow has depth, but when we look at a lot of modern life and culture, so much of it is exceptionally shallow. And so we might ask whether we give ourselves the opportunity to do those things that are going to deepen us; whether we set time aside for example for prayer, scripture reading and contemplation, or whatever other activities are going to give us depth so that the word can take root in us?

Secondly, we might think about the fertility of the soil in the parable. I'm always rather alarmed by the plant food that is called fish, blood and bone. I'm not a gardener but I understand that fish, blood and bone feeds the soil and makes it able to be fertile so that the crops may grow strong. Our Christian equivalent of fish, blood and bone can also sound a bit scary: it is the body and blood of Christ that we receive at the Eucharist, and which nurtures and fertilises the Christian heart. As Jesus says, 'my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed'. Do we see receiving communion as a weekly or less-than-weekly routine, or do we see it as the equivalent of fish, blood and bone that will make our hearts fertile and receptive to the word that is sown within us?

Thirdly, we might think about the birds: in the parable, they come and peck away at the seed that is sown on the path until it has all gone. We might see these birds as other people, in particular those whom we don't particularly get on with: they can feel as though they peck away at us and wear us down. Perhaps we have every right to be angry with them, or perhaps we don't, but whatever the case, those little bits of anger and bitterness peck away at us and stop our hearts from receiving the word and the kingdom.

And fourthly, the thorns: these, Jesus says, are the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These we might see as the anxieties, the

worries that afflict us and choke the seed that is growing in our hearts. It is certainly difficult to let go of them, but Jesus does remind us that much of it is pointless: 'who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?' If we can find some way of laying those aside, we can receive the seed that God wants to sow in our hearts, which so easily gets choked by the thorns and thistles of anxiety.

This parable, then, encourages us to work on our hearts so that they can receive the seed that is sown in them. I've got a friend and former mentor who has very recently died. She was a solitary Anglican nun who, perhaps rather surprisingly, lived for most of her life in Oxford. She originally came from California and, perhaps in a rather Californian way, would often talk about the work that we needed to do on ourselves. I used to slightly wonder about that formulation: I think that to English ears, doing work on ourselves can seem a bit self-indulgent or even a bit grandiose? But surely Jesus in the parable of the sower is encouraging us to do just that: the field won't get ready by accident: it needs us to work on it, but if we do, that work will pay back thirty, sixty- and a hundred- fold whatever work we may put in.

But finally perhaps we might notice something about the sower in this parable? Think of him going out and scattering his seed. On the face of it, he doesn't seem to be particularly intelligent because he seems to make no effort to target the seed he is sowing on to those parts of land that might be expected to yield a result for him. Rather, he mostly wastes it on the path, the rocky ground, or thorn and thistle-infested areas where it stands little chance of taking root. Surely a more careful sower would adopt a more strategic approach. He would work out where is the more fertile ground, and sow the seed only in the places where it is likely to thrive.

Well, thank God that he is like that sower. When our hearts are shallow and unreceptive he still sows his seed. When there are loads of birds around to peck away at it, he still sows his seed.

When our hearts are full of the thistles of care and anxiety, he still sows his seed. He doesn't give up on ground that seems to be most unpromising but continues to sow his seed. Perhaps you can remember the final verse of the Easter hymn, Now the Green Blade Riseth:

When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
Thy touch can call us back to life again;
Fields of our hearts, that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.