**4th August 2013**

[**Matthew 13:1-9**](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=186469439)**,** [**18-23**](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=186833336)

Just over a week ago our church, in partnership with St. James, put on a holiday club for 40+ children and we had fun but we also tried to share with them something of our Christian faith. The majority of the children had no church contact. We can only hope they had appositive experience that may open them further to explore the adventure of faith.

It is always an interesting story to find out how people came to faith and what key moments in their lives were where the seed of faith took hold. This autumn (not that summer is over yet!) we are having some sessions looking at how we can sow the seed of faith in our ‘Fishing’ course to mix metaphors. I’m also looking at how faith is already expressed in our contemporary culture through mediums such as film, music, art, literature and poetry and how we can link into conversations in those arenas.

In October we are having a church retreat cum holiday up in the URCs Windermere Centre. The theme is faith and poetry and looking at how some of the great poets expressed their faith: how they found the language to describe their longings, their hopes, their experiences, their doubts, and their faith.

I have been up at our flat in Kendal last week, and after a few days camping on the Isle of Arran; we visited Grasmere which was the home to William Wordsworth. I didn’t realise that he was sin France at the time of the French Revolution and had idealistic hopes that it would be the triumph of idealism and rationality. He was greatly disillusioned by the outcome and came back to England at the start of the nineteenth century and in the next ten years wrote his most famous poetry where he put his hope in the inward experience of the heart and soul and his experience of the divine through nature.

*They flash upon the inward eye*

*Which is the bliss of solitude*

*And then my pleasure fills*

*And dances with the daffodils.*

. His disillusionment was the soil in which his romantic style flourished and acted as a counterbalance to the rationalism of the enlightenment. Wordsworth and many others we will explore on the Windermere retreat, but there will also be lots of time to enoj9y the lakes, time for inward solitude, and times to have fun together.

The parable of the sower is a well-known parable of Jesus which offers an allegory of how the seed of faith is sown and how it bears fruit in some people’s lives but sadly not in others. So two questions: What kind of soil are you? What kind of sower are you?

I remember a visit to my church as a child by a mission team from Cliff College. They did a sketch on the parable of the sower and the punch line was ‘so what kind of soil are you?’ They had been working with gangs of youths in the inner city and had tried to share with them the gospel. Now they were asking us, in our church’s Sunday school room, what kind of soil we kids from the estates were.

My friends and I looked around at each other. We knew what the *right* answer was. The parable lays it all out clearly. Who wants to be among those who fail to produce a crop? But the right answer was also wrong. Who could claim they’re good soil -- producing 30, 60, 100 times what was planted?

So most of us hedged our bets. “I think I’m a little bit rocky,” one said. “Maybe a few thorns,” another said. We wanted to say something religious, but we also didn’t want to lie.

Don’t you hate those Sunday school sorts of questions?

I heard a story from America about an African-American preacher who was preaching on this passage who also wanted to know what sort of soil his audience was. Are we the path? Rocky soil? Thorny soil? Or good soil? He asked. But then he made a turn no one expected. He said in his neighbourhood there aren’t a lot of kids with advantages. Most were poor; those who weren’t still had bad schools to attend; those who made it through those had few job prospects.

“There are thorns and rocks all around,” he preached. “We have to get our hands in the soil. We have to dig in that dirt. We have to pull up those rocks. We have to root out those thorns. It’ll hurt,” he promised, “but if we do, we can turn bad soil into good, so that it’ll bear a crop for Jesus!”

Look at this [image](http://www.jesusmafa.com/anglais/imag20.htm). There’s not only Jesus sowing; there are people labouring, preparing the soil. In this way of looking at it, the question isn’t whether *we’re* good or bad or rocky or thorny soil. The question is who around us has obstacles in their way? Then we dig in deep into their lives, getting our hands dirty, cut, nicked, pulling up roots and rocks and thorns, so that Jesus’ seed can take root and a harvest can follow.

So who here is willing to get their hands a little dirty and a little banged up and cut up for Jesus? If your hands hurt from the thorns, look over at the one gardening with you and notice that his hands already have holes in them.

Some wise teachers in the ancient church asked about the different kinds of bad soil.

“Some seed fell on the path,” Jesus said. The path is sun-baked. It has no moisture, so it doesn’t open up for the word, and the birds come and eat the seed. That’s us when we fail to understand the word. The moisture that waters the soil is humility. When we don’t soften our hearts with humility, they fail to open to God’s word, and the birds come and eat the seed.

What about the rocky soil? Jesus says that’s a person who receives the word of the kingdom with joy but endures only for a little while and then falls away with any trouble or persecution on account of the word.

There are versions of the Christian faith out there that promise smooth sailing: if you believe this way or give that gift or claim something or other, your bank account will be full and your sorrows empty.

Those versions of the faith must have trouble with Jesus -- who promises persecutions here, troubles on account of the word. Grapes have to be pressed to become wine, olives have to be squashed to become oil, grain has to be threshed to become bread, Jesus has to be crucified to save us -- and we don’t think discipleship will hurt?

One of the ancient teachers, Gregory the Great, said that the good we do has no value if we fail to be patient with the evildoing of our neighbour.

The good we do has no value if we fail to be patient with the evildoing of our neighbour. God expects us to bear fruit. And he expects us to bear fruit surrounded by rocks. The more we dig in the soil, the bloodier our hands will be.

There was a woman who was really struggling with another woman in her congregation. Both were committed volunteers, serving the church with their time and treasure. And they couldn’t get along. It’s a story as old as Cain and Abel, Mary and Martha.

And she said something wonderful about her difficult sister in Christ. She’d been reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer -- “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those ...” -- and she said, “You know what? That woman is going to make a Christian out of me.” Indeed she might.

The church is the place where we bear fruit surrounded by rocks -- our sisters and brothers in Christ -- and where we’re rocks to other people. And we hope that God not only uses us to make Christians out of others but uses others to make Christians out of us -- people who forgive as Jesus commands. People who love as Jesus loves.

Thorny soil -- Jesus says the thorns in the soil are “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.” They choke the word, so it yields nothing.

Now I have three teenager children and a property I am thinking more about money than I have ever done. Not that I wanted to be rich; if I wanted to try for that, other professions are better bets than church ministry.

It’s more subtle than that. I’m just planning, trying to be frugal and wise. Have we paid off the right bills first? Are we saving enough? Those are good questions to ask. But have you ever noticed they can take over your thinking, your worrying, and your living? Wealth is like thorns because it pricks you, bites at you. It could be gone tomorrow, or you could have plenty of it tomorrow and it won’t make you happy.

John D. Rockefeller, when he was the wealthiest man in the world, was asked how much money was enough. And he said “Just a little bit more.” Those are thorns, wrapped around us, choking us off from being fruitful. We think about making more money we become less willing to give of our time to others, to be selfless in our actions and gracious in our disposition. We get throttled by the thorns of money, the cares of our own self-centred world. We close in on ourselves and we stop breathing the sweet clear air of faith. We choke on our own obsessions and anxieties. Time to get the weed killer out.

But then some soil yields an abundance -- 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.

These are all good readings of the parable, ones I commend to you. But here’s another reading of this parable: Who is this farmer? And what kind of sower is he? What kind of sower are we?

I don’t know much about gardening or farming. Those of you with tough, callused hands know this better than I do -- you don’t farm the way the Gospel describes, do you? Jesus describes a sower who goes out and throws seed everywhere. On the sidewalk, over in the thorn bushes, in the rocky mountainside. This isn’t the sort of precision of one who wants every seed to succeed.

The farmer doesn’t fertilize the soil, dig around it, apply insecticide, carefully cover the seed over.

He just flings seed everywhere -- on the highway, into the bushes, on land that’s his and land that’s not -- indiscriminately. Who knows where it’ll land? If we knew each other better already, I’d be tempted to throw seed from up here, on the carpet, on some of y’all -- I mean, who knows where it might spring up and give us a crop?

God just flings seed everyplace. Apparently, God has seed to spare and likes to see what can grow where it’s not supposed to grow.

And what about around here? I wonder what ministries we have that were a wild idea someone grew, something somebody thought up that sounded crazy at first, and then a little less crazy, then sort of awesome, and then it worked? That’s how God works!

Someone says, “Hey, I think we could have a club for adults with learning disabilities.” And we do. Or someone says, “Hey, I think this church can support a child contact centre” Check. Or, “We can have a food bank.” Or how about going into partnership with the town council to get a youth centre back from Dursley’ Now we are.

Maybe we could have a prize for the best crazy, unattainable idea anyone can dream up around here. It’s our God who throws seed everywhere. Some of it took root in you and me, or we wouldn’t be here.

Where can we throw seed now?

Last month I went to a conference about Church Growth in the United Reformed Church. If you approached church growth in the same way that you thought about how to sow grass seed, then you will begin to be careful about how you prepare the soil and scatter the seed and water it. In other words, you will begin to look for the neighborhoods and people where your efforts will be most effective, and you will begin targeting the kind of people who would be good prospects, and you will search out the techniques that will be most fruitful and will do the kind of follow up that will ensure the greatest yield. But it's almost exactly the opposite of the way Jesus went about his ministry.

And here's the reason: Jesus wasn't doing anything as predictable as sowing grass. He was trying to sow the Word of God on the unpredictable soil of the human heart. Not only is it unpredictable, it is invisible, which means that you can't tell, just by looking, what kind of heart someone has. So you begin to sow seed everywhere and in every way imaginable. Some people talk to their friends and neighbors quite openly about their faith in God. Others try to show their Christian faith by example. Some leave gospel tracts in public places, and others perform random acts of kindness. All of these can be ways of sowing seed. A lot of it will fall in places where it never takes root. Some of it will fall in places where it gets a good start but doesn't last. Some of it will fall in places where it gets choked out by competing interests. That's just how it is with ministry. Jesus himself could have told you that. But he could have also told you this-that sometimes the scattered seed of the Word finds good soil and grows and produces a bumper crop. And since you can't predict just how or where the seed is going to fall, or when or if it is going to produce, you just scatter it wherever you can and hope for the best.

The other week I was in a pub having a meal and one of the waiters asked me if I was still doing assemblies at Rednock. He had been a sixth former there a couple of years ago and had remembered and appreciated my talks in the school. He was about to go out to do some volunteer work in a school in Uganda. I blessed him and wished him well.

Fred Craddock tells a story about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in one of the churches he had served as pastor twenty years before, and he would have sworn that if there was ever a person who never heard a word he said, that teenage girl was it. She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, drawing pictures on the bulletin. But when her father died, she looked up her old pastor, the Rev. Fred Craddock, and gave him a call. "I don't know if you remember me," she started. Oh, yes, he remembered. "When my daddy died, I thought I was going to come apart," she continued. "I cried and cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons . . ." And Fred Craddock was stunned. She had remembered something he had said in one of his sermons?! It was proof enough to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root.

I confess that I am a shameless giver away of Christian literature, books and tracts. I well know that people will dump it of shelve it but I also know that occasionally it gets read and makes a difference so I don’t care too much about the rejection and what others may think about me. If it’s worth passing on, pass it on. When I was at university we had a Christian book stall outside the hall of residence dining hall and we’d offer free literature to fellow students. Of course being part of the God Squad you got plenty of abuse but we had a good banter with our fellow students. Four years later I was in a church and someone came up to me and said he was one of my victims. He’d accepted a book from me and initially he thought I’m not reading that and threw it in the corner. But then eventually he picked it up and got interested. It started a journey into faith for him.

All the more reason then to be reckless in my scattering of seed, to be less concerned about efficiency than extravagance, to throw it everywhere you can in the hope that somewhere, somehow, it will find good soil.

The truth is that someone was reckless enough to scatter the seed of the Word where you could hear it; and in some of you, especially, it has found good soil, and taken deep root, and yielded thirty-, or sixty-, or a hundredfold.

There is no guarantee of growth. There is no guarantee of a harvest – that is in God’s hands. We are however encouraged to be sowers of the seed. We are encouraged to ensure our lives are lives of good soil where the seed of faith can grow and become fruitful.

*With material from Jason Byassee’s sermon on July 17, 2011, at Boone United Methodist Church in Boone, N.C. on the Faith & Leadership website that offers sermons that shed light on issues of Christian leadership. The image above is from* [*Life of Jesus Mafa*](http://www.jesusmafa.com/index.htm)*, an organization that has developed 62 images from the New Testament in an African context. The artworks were created by a French team in response to the desire expressed by the Mafa Christian community of Cameroon. Used with permission, all rights reserved.*