

Sermon

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Your word is a lantern to my feet: and a light to my path. Amen.

I love it when one part of our scripture echoes or informs another. And it happens today when the very first verse of our psalm foreshadows the Gospel that is to come. Your word is a lantern to my feet: and a light to my path. In a single poetic line, the psalmist delivers one of the core truths of this famous parable of the Sower, the very first of the parables in chapter thirteen of Matthew's Gospel. And as I meditated on this parable over the last week, I marveled at how relevant this simple farming metaphor is to today's world. Perhaps it's because I am living and serving here in Lara and Little River, surrounded by fields and paddocks, that this parable has taken on new meaning within me. Perhaps because I find myself located in a parish on the cusp of growth and rebirth, that this parable resonated to me. Perhaps it is just God's providence that the Word is just right for the time in which we receive it. So my prayer today is that this parable finds meaning in your hearts too, and that perhaps it stirs you to action as a generous sower of the seed, the good news of God's love for creation, the world and all people.

Well before we dive into the parable, I thought it would be useful to set this chapter in context. As I said back in Advent last year when we started with Matthew's Gospel, it's focused on the big issues, justice and mercy for all people, not just the Israelites. And its message is unmistakably that of a God who desires to heal, to gather and to save rather than condemn. The Gospel can be structured in five segments, each segment containing narrative about Jesus and then a section of discourse or sermons by Jesus. So for example back in February, we heard the Sermon on the

Mount and I preached the following week on Salt and Light. These passages, drawn from chapter five, are part of the first discourse or Great Sermon as it's also known and follow the narrative around Jesus' birth and early public life. Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel is the third discourse or "Parables Discourse" and it follows two chapters of narrative about the controversy surrounding Jesus' and his rejection by the authorities and others. So in many ways, chapter 13 is Jesus' response to these very human circumstances and to also place them in the wider design of God, indicated as always in Matthew by Scripture, references from the Old Testament.

So we will be treated over these three weeks to the seven parables in chapter 13. What is a parable? Well my trusty study Bible describes them as illustrations drawn from nature or everyday life that tease the imagination, challenge accepted values or illustrate a point. And I think this first parable of the Sower does all of these three things. Let's have a closer look.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:

Does this sound familiar? Isn't it just like the beginning of the first discourse in chapter five?

Then Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

In chapter five, Jesus delivered his manifesto of being a follower of God. In chapter 13 he extends his instructions using parables and Jesus bookends this parable with the instruction to listen, and says:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

So how does this parable resonate with you? As I drove back from the You Yangs parkrun yesterday morning, I noticed the birds in the plowed fields having a great time. I'm not sure what they were eating, plowed up worms or newly laid seed but it seemed to me that God was presenting to me a picture of the parable in the here and now. Jesus presents these four different scenarios for the fate of the sown seed and even though only one of those scenarios produces the sought after outcome, I find the parable very encouraging. For the seed that falls on good soil, and grows to maturity, it produces so much more than just another single seed. And I love that the Sower throws the seed out everywhere, on the path, in the rocks, among the weeds, as well as on the good soil. To me it shows the generosity, the abundance of love, that is available to all. Are we like the Sower? Do we go throwing that seed out everywhere, even though we know that we might be rejected, or that our seed might fall on deaf ears?

In the second part of our reading today, Jesus then goes on to explain the parable. And I think it's a wonderful insight into the mind of God. He says:

‘Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

My goodness, wasn't Jesus' world just like our world today? Isn't our world also full of people who don't hear the word, the good news, or even if they do hear it, the cares and lures of the world distract them from the word of God? But here we are! If we are sitting here in church, it probably means that we have a hunger for God, that the Holy Spirit dwells within us, as Paul says today, or as the psalmist says "Your word is a lantern to me feet and a light to my path". It probably means that we too can be like the Sower, and throw that seed out among the people of Lara and Little River, and see which seed takes root and flourishes.

What stops us from throwing that seed out? Why are we so often shy or timid about letting people know that we love Jesus, and the impact that Jesus plays in our lives? Or perhaps even about inviting people to church, Alpha or a social event? Possibly because we don't know if the powerpoint is going to work this week?! I think prayer has a lot to do with it.

You might remember that at Pentecost I preached about the 4 "Ps" of a growing church: Prayer, Presence, Proclamation and Persuasion. Today

you all received a prayer card with the missional prayer on one side and our Vision on the other. I think its providential that our Vision of Welcoming, God centred and Thriving matches the prayer. Help our church to grow in numbers, in spiritual commitment to you, and in service to the community.

So how can you use this card? Perhaps you can keep it near your prayer space and use it as one of your personal prayers. Perhaps you can then turn the card over and pray around our vision. Pray that you will welcome everyone that you encounter in your daily living and that we as a community will welcome all people into our midst and encourage them in their journey with Jesus, so they don't fall away like the seed in the rocks, or get choked by the weeds that surround them in life. Pray to keep God at the centre of your life, guiding you and strengthening you in all you do. Pray that we as a community will thrive here in Lara and Little River.

If you find prayer difficult, why not join the zoom prayer group on Wednesday nights at 7:30pm? Someone always leads the group and you can join and participate as much as you feel called to do. Joining a prayer group is a great way to start a prayer habit. We usually spend half an hour together in prayer and Zoom details for this group are always in the pew sheet.

Church growth is underpinned by prayer. Over the next month, we will be planning an Alpha to start in late August, family services to start in September and, God willing, a play group to start in October. I ask you to pray for us all as we make this journey to renewal and growth in the name of Jesus. Let us pray together the Missional prayer:

God of Mission,
Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give,

Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,
Joy to our worship,
And power to our witness.
Help our church to grow in numbers,
In spiritual commitment to you,
And in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.