

A PARABLE OF GROWTH

Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23 and Galatians 5.22-26

Like many parishes in this part of the world FPC is set up - to use the jargon of the Church - for maintenance rather than mission.

There is no better illustration of this than the way many of us behave over tea and coffee following the morning service. What could be more natural, you might think, than to want to catch up with our close friends in the congregation whom we haven't seen for at least a week and longer if we have been off on holiday?

In the church in which I grew up in Glasgow there was a Youth Fellowship, I remember, and every Sunday morning after church the members of the YF would gather together - not over a cup of coffee or tea - such things had not been invented in churches back then, but at the door of the church making our plans for the next meeting of the YF on a Saturday or Sunday evening, talking about school and, for the older ones, the university. We never spoke, I remember, to anyone outside of our comparatively small group of friends and neither did our parents who, in those days, would be enjoying a cigarette on the pavement while talking about important matters like the bowling club or the Woman's Guild. These, then, were what some still regard as the good old days!

But we cannot afford these good old days in the church for much longer. For while we have been busy socialising, the gap between ourselves, the national church, and society has been steadily widening so that people no longer simply 'turn up' on a Sunday for one of our services and then join our church. Now we have to go out to them in some way or another, invite them to come in, and when they do we have to offer them a welcome they will not forget in the hope that they will see the good in us and, hopefully, want to belong to the fellowship of the Church.

If we cannot do this *at the very least* then we will have failed. As one younger member of the church said to me recently after a meeting to discuss how we can become a church geared up for mission and not just maintenance, if we do not get the welcome right we can put a red line through every other scheme and strategy we have dreamed of to make the Church of Scotland once more a great force for good in Scotland and beyond.

And so, with these few words, we come yet again to the famous Parable of the Sower, although some people prefer to call it The Parable of the Soils as we shall hear again in a moment.

It's a parable about 'growth'. It reminds us what in large measure the Church is all

about. Its about 'Christian fellowship', or, if you prefer, 'Christian Maintenance', yes, but it is also about 'mission'. Rob Frost, a leading Methodist, has wryly observed that for just about as long as anyone can remember "The denominations have cultivated beautiful gardens, not cast raw seed onto barren land." Properly understood the Parable of the Sower challenges that kind of mind-set in the Church.

It begins, "A man went out to sow corn...." (Matthew 13.3)

From the very beginning the Christian Church took this parable seriously. Like Jesus before them the first Christians made it their first priority to 'preach the kingdom' in words but also in deeds through acts of healing, what we would call exorcism, and in many other helping and saving ways - they preached the gospel and, if necessary, they used words!

In the beginning people like the apostle Paul would journey far a-field telling the people he met about the wonderful person and personality that is Jesus Christ! He would lay it on thick about how Jesus would talk about the new (and peaceful) Kingdom of God, about how he would heal the sick, how he would welcome everyone who came to him, and turn no one away. Because many of those with whom he spoke had a background in Judaism he would talk to them about Christ's 'saving' death - for the whole idea of 'sacrifice' was very important in the ancient world - and, of course, he always talked about Christ's resurrection from the dead - for Paul, but also for us, new life in Christ and the hope of glory when we die. And many there were - or so it seemed - who having heard Paul preach, asked: 'What is to stop us being baptised!?' Can we become Christians - followers of Christ, too? And because this man and so many others took the risk of preaching the gospel to people, the majority of whom were complete strangers, the Church grew. And in only that way did it grow! "Once there was a man who went out to sow corn...."

For us, though, there is a problem. Nothing is ever simple and certainly not this business of 'sowing corn' of proclaiming the Kingdom. In fact there are several problems -

1. We are no longer convinced, some of us, that the corn with which we are asked to sow is any good. Oh it was once very, very, good! People heard the news about the Kingdom and were 'saved.' But not any more or so some sociologists would tell us. Was it ever entirely about social trends?

2. There is what people call 'the cringe factor'. At least that's what we call it here in Scotland. I am told that the former leader of New Labour here in Scotland,

Wendy Alexander, a daughter of the manse let it be said, used to at the drop of a hat give some of her colleagues 'a piece of her mind' in public to their great embarrassment! People talked about having been 'Wend-ied'. There is a Christian equivalent - we talk about 'bible bashing'. When somebody, perhaps brandishing a big black bible, tries to convince us that we are sinners right there in the middle of Princess Street! Nobody wants that but some of us have got it into our heads that in order to be the one who goes out to sow we have to become that person.

3. There is a credibility gap. Imagine for a moment that we are not in the business of 'mission', of sowing corn, but instead we are in the business of selling vacuum cleaners 'door to door'. We knock on someone's door, the door is opened and we say that we are selling vacuum cleaners. Assuming that we are welcomed into the house and we begin the well-trying ritual of emptying dust and dirt onto the best carpet - we switch on the vacuum cleaner and, like magic, the carpet is made clean again! Has not the owner of the house got every right at this point to ask us how it works? And what would we, what could we tell him? He has every right to expect the person who wants to sell him a vacuum cleaner to know something about vacuums, certainly beyond that of switching the thing on! And if the vacuum salesman says that he doesn't know how it works, well, then, would you buy a vacuum from that man or woman?

4. Most important of all there is the little matter of Christian commitment. Are we committed people? Are we utterly committed to the task of 'mission' as Christ once was, as Paul the apostle was, as the Church is meant to be - committed to go out and sow the seed of the Word of God? Or do we find ourselves constantly making excuses as to why there is every good reason not to do so - we are too busy doing other things, I used to do that but it's somebody else's turn now, I'm not cut out for that sort of thing, I'm too old/too young to do that sort of thing. etc. etc.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that this will be easy. I am not saying that it will not be demanding of time, talents and energy. That a way of doing this work has to be thought out and then tried and tested in the modern world which is a much more sophisticated world than the world of Peter and Paul. But if I tell you now that there are ways of doing this vital work today, different in many respects from what was attempted in the past, are you willing to give of your time, talents, and energy to do it?

But what if we are - rather than the sower in the parable - what if we are one of the different types of soils that the sower encountered when he went out to sow? - this must be taken into consideration. Every gardener let alone a farmer knows that whether or not seeds will grow depends on several factors - one of the most important being the quality of the soil.

Because the fact is that whether or not the seed of the Word of God that is sown takes root in us and goes on to produce a great Christian harvest to an extent depends upon the kind of people we are. This, in fact, is the proper background to the parable of the Sower. People in the Church from the beginning have been greatly concerned that people have gone out - or, if you like, preachers in pulpits have been faithful in proclaiming the word to congregations and very little or no harvest at all has been the result! Surely, people have asked themselves, the seed is good? Why then does it not always root in the minds and the hearts of the hearers? Eta Linneman who has written a scholarly book on the Parables sums up the message of this second stage in the Parable by saying that "much is lost for one reason or another."

1. The first reason seems to be this: There is a soil that is simply too hard for the seed, the Word of God - to penetrate. Various interpretations have been offered over the years in answer to the question 'who or what is the soil that is too hard to penetrate?' For me the answer lies here in a congregation like Fairmilehead. Much of what is preached in the Church of Jesus Christ of necessity in the 21st century is a gospel of 'change.' The Church needs to change and change again because the world is constantly changing! A few years ago I went to the doctor with a sore throat in the middle of summer. He said that he couldn't see down my throat to see if there was anything wrong and that I would have to go to hospital. So I went to the Chalmers Outpatient Clinic and there an ear, nose and throat specialist passed a camera down my throat. To my great relief he could see nothing wrong. But he asked me if I suffered from hay fever? I said that I did not. But he sent me for hay fever tests anyway where it was discovered that I was allergic to pollen and dust mites! What I couldn't understand was why? Why had I suddenly developed an allergy to pollen and dust mites? The answer was because I was changing - my body was changing which in fact our bodies do all the time! So why not the Church - the Body of Christ - to make it more relevant, more mission orientated, more outward looking? But always there are those who do not want the church to change, who cannot stand change of any kind, regardless of the Word that is being preached from the pulpit or elsewhere. They are in their comfort zone and nothing and nobody will move them out of it! There is a mind-set that the word, like the seed, simply cannot penetrate.

2. There was, secondly, soil that was too shallow for the seed to develop a root system. I have come across that too in church life. People who at some early stage 'decided for Christ', who were baptised, confirmed, joined the church and then did absolutely nothing about it! For them this was the end of the process, not the beginning. Time after time the opportunity is offered to people to attend lectures or join groups for Bible Study, but the call is left unanswered. People say that they

do not go to such things because they do not want other people to know how shallow their faith really is - how little they understand. Do we have no interest in the Word of God that we would want to dig deeper and find the truth? Do we lack the courage fearing what others might think or say? We should realise that if we do not know enough about our faith then we are in good company and perhaps the journey towards a deeper understanding of our faith is made easier if we journey together.

3. Finally, Jesus says in the parable, there is the kind of soil that is full of weeds. So full of weeds that the seed that is sown gets lost and is finally choked by the weeds round about it. Is this not a mini parable about life in the 21st century? There is so much to be done, so little time to do it. So many things clamouring for our attention. Children and parent's expectations for their children play a part in this particularly in middle class areas. Well, what are the really important things in life and where does the hearing of God's word to us come in the list of our priorities? I was reading a book the other day that was suggesting that church attendance might be 'down' right across the board but there is no need to panic - people have not given up on the Church completely they are just busy doing other things! I'm sure that's right in many cases. But the issue here is are they hearing the word of God? Is that word dwelling richly in them? Are they any longer listening for God's word that they might get out and 'do it'? There doesn't seem to be much point of being a church member if we are not part of the worshipping community of the Church on a regular basis and active in our membership of the Body of Christ.

I said a minute ago, 'finally', but of course there is some Good News at the last! The parable concludes by reminding us, Christ's Church today, that despite all the setbacks there are those in whom the seed which is God's word does wonderfully penetrate, does root, is not choked by other things, and does grow to produce a great harvest - "And the seeds sown in the good soil stand for those who hear the message and understand it; they bear fruit, some as much as a hundred, others sixty, and others thirty." (Matthew 13.23)

Whether we are thinking here the so-called "fruits of the Spirit" mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Galatians - that the word becomes a harvest in us of qualities such as love, joy, peace, patience, self-control etc - or whether and this may be the more likely of the two although they are not mutually exclusive - that we ourselves in whom God's word 'dwells richly' go out and share that word with others who in turn respond to it, is neither, in the end, neither here nor there. What matters is surely as James S Stewart said long ago now, that "God wins his harvest in you and me, and through us in the world." We may feel that in our own strength we can do nothing (good), that we are inadequate, helpless creatures - particularly when it

comes to taking Christ's mission to the world - but then we believe that Christ's power is in us and with us - how then can we fail to produce a great harvest even if it takes longer today than it did before?