

Trinity 8, Proper 10, Year A

13 July 2008

Isaiah 55:10-13

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The prodigal farmer

Didn't examine the ground first to do a feasibility study. Just scattered it. He just did it. He didn't choose where, he scattered everywhere.

Interpret this story in several ways.

First, **we are the farmer**. Let's not worry about whether we should do this, or that. Just do something. Doing our job properly, looking after ourselves properly, nurturing growth in others. It's not our place to worry about whether or not the seed will sprout – we can't predict the future. My last job: students' reaction unpredictable. Prodigal with my work: schools, visits, walking the streets, preaching, who knows where the ground is receptive? Who knows who listens to the sermons?

Second, **we are the seed**: the seed is all we are heard to say and seen to do. We need to challenge injustice, We need to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

Third, I take today's Gospel as much as a story for each one of us individually as a story about describing different types of people, so **we are the ground**. We are mixed ground. Paul talks of sin and flesh. His use of the word flesh is not ours. Paul talks of being on a journey from an old life – for which he uses the term in the flesh – towards a new life in Christ – for which he uses the term in the spirit. (Nothing to do with soul and body). And a characteristic of the fleshly life is sin. There are several ways of looking at sin:

- wandering from the path of enlightenment, missing the mark
- erecting barrier between yourself and the Divine
- erecting barrier between someone else and the Divine
- not making the most of the opportunities life brings - a life un-lived

Sinning is on the whole quite hopeful – we can keep trying. A failure to achieve perfection, but no barrier to trying again. We will have to bear the consequences of our actions, but that's another matter.

We are all a mixture of life in the spirit, and life in the flesh.

- There is within each of us ground that yields good harvest.
- There is within each of us ground that yields crops that are choked by uncontrollable passions, by the sin of the world. We are all imperfect – we can never know the consequences of our actions, or of our failing to act. Many of us live off, or hope to live off, pensions from companies that in Biblical terms are deeply sinful. There is no way of avoiding this, the sin of the world.
- There is within each of us stony ground on which nothing grows. Quite often that stony ground is hidden from us until some event, some crisis, makes us realise the errors of our ways for decades before – we see ourselves and our actions in a new light. And it is a story that calls for self examination to identify the stony ground to confront it. It's not until we've recognised it for what it is that we can do anything about it. When we see all this, it is like being led back in peace; instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. The rain and the snow come down from heaven to water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout. Again, a hopeful message.

So what is my message: since we can not get everything right, we just bash on, doing the best we can. The meaning of life is love. It will not be perfect, but we can do no more. And we can try and grow into the life of the spirit by forgiving: forgiving others, and forgiving ourselves. Jesus teaches that we will be forgiven when we acknowledge our faults: when we have seen ourselves in a mirror as someone else sees us, as God sees us. **It can be pretty frightening when we realise we are not as good as we thought we were.** But CHRISTIAN teaching is that such penitence, turning again, yields forgiveness. *The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*

Having opened our minds to the possibility that we are not as good as we thought we were, the cleansing waters can flow. Having acknowledged our sin, and resolved to turn again, we let the rain and snow from heaven water the earth within, asking it bring forth and sprout. The great flood.

A postscript

There are people in both my parishes who object to the notion of women priests and bishops. There is no secret about that: you made it clear that you did not want me to be a woman. I don't know yet if there

are people who enthusiastically support the ordination of women, all I know is that there are people in both parishes who oppose it. You might bear a thought for me: I have to minister to you all – every one of you, and it is my privilege so to do. Please remember that.

All I ask is that we be simple and straightforward with each other, generous in listening and careful in speaking.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
 When true simplicity is gain'd
 To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
 To turn, turn will be out delight
 'Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Joseph Brackett 1797-1882