17 May 2020: Matins Sermon
Rogation Sunday
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‘Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!’

This the Sunday before Ascension Day has traditionally been designated Rogation Sunday. It has roots in a spring festival of ancient Rome, and it’s a day when we ask that God’s almighty hand should feed and water the good seed that has been scattered on the land. In the past, the day would have been marked by ‘beating the bounds’, when a church procession would trace the parish boundary, stopping at important landmarks, and praying to God to send warmth to swell the grain until all be safely gathered in. Wands of willow were cut and carried, and used to beat the parish borders. It was a useful way to preserve the collective memory of where one parish ended and another began.

The cycle and energy of nature provided Jesus with many vivid and ready-to-hand images for his parables: the budding and barren fig trees, the leaven, the tares among the wheat. In particular, the extraordinary power of seed was a favourite metaphor of Jesus for the kingdom of God. So, he said, the kingdom is as though a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. Or it is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, yet when it is sown it becomes the greatest of all shrubs. The parable of the sower in our second reading is another and, of course, among the best known of all the parables:

‘Behold, a sower went forth to sow; and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them. Some fell upon stony places…and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprung up, and choked them. But other seed fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.’

In interpreting this parable it’s often assumed that this is a story about a clumsy, wasteful farmer, broadcasting his seed willy-nilly, careless of where it lands. But in Palestine (and I
think this is still the case today) the fields weren’t ploughed, and then the good seed scattered, as in this country, but sowed first, and then ploughed. Here’s the New Testament scholar, Joachim Jeremias:

‘The farmer sows deliberately on the path which the villagers have trodden over the stubble, since he intends to plough the seed in when he ploughs up the path. He sows intentionally among the thorns standing withered in the fallow, because they too will be ploughed up. Nor need it surprise us that some grains fell upon rocky ground; the underlying limestone, thinly covered with soil, barely shows above the surface until the ploughshare jars against it. What appears to the Western mind as bad farming is simply customary usage in Palestinian conditions.’

This parable is understood (convincingly, I think) to be about evangelism, about spreading the word, about sharing the gospel. It’s an allegorical parable in the sense that, not just the story as a whole, but the details of the story stand for something. So, the sower is the follower of Jesus, and the seed is the gospel, the good news that God has entered our world to redeem us. I think we need to be careful not to interpret the wayside, the stony ground and the thorns too specifically, as has often happened in the past, so that, for instance, the thorns are seen to represent the temptations of the flesh; or the stony ground, pagan beliefs and practices. Instead, I think these are simply reminders, reassurances even, that spreading the gospel is never without obstacles.

So what is this famous parable saying to us? I think it reminds us first that it is our Christian duty not to hide our light under a bushel; not, that’s to say, to keep our faith to ourselves. There is a clear injunction running through the New Testament that our faith is to be shared, so that others too may enter the kingdom. Second, the parable suggests that we are to be generous in spreading our faith. In other words, it’s not for us to worry about whether this is the right moment, or that’s the right person. We’re not to concern ourselves if, at times, we may be throwing pearls before swine. The truth is we can’t tell whether or not the gospel we share is taking root. We can’t see what lies beneath the surface. Only the ploughing will bring it to light.

Sowing the gospel isn’t, it needs to be said, only about talking, preaching and persuading. Actions often speak louder than words, and Bible-bashing does more harm than good. Just as important, perhaps more important, is putting our faith into practice, living what we believe to be true. That’s what alerts people to something about us that’s different and attractive. It’s our love for others, our patience, our kindness, our gentleness, our
humility, our self-control (what St Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit) that strike people as special. Certainly the compelling example of our faith is much needed at this difficult time, and there are still plenty of opportunities for us to show it. It really can make an enormous difference.

Finally, I wonder whether seed might not prove a powerful metaphor for what is happening now to the world. Painful, worrying and frustrating though these times may be, they are also sowing seeds that, with God’s grace, will bring forth a plentiful harvest. Think, for instance, of the beneficial effect that limited travel is having on reducing pollution. We can see what can be achieved for the environment, and we may discover a new determination not just to return to where we were before. Think too of the greater kindness and consideration that people are showing to each other, and of the willingness of so many to take risks for others. Think of the appreciation we are showing now to those who dedicate their lives to caring for the elderly, the sick and the dying. Think of the time and space we’re finding to think and read and pray. Think how striving for success or accumulating possessions suddenly seems unimportant. All these may be seeds that, when the world recovers from this virus, will bring forth fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold. ‘Do not be deceived’ wrote St Paul, ‘God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap . . . And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do no lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all.’ Amen.