

St Mary Maldon
10 Parish Mass
12th July 2020.
Trinity 5

In the last few years of my teaching career, I was involved in the training of secondary school teachers, both in my own school and in other Essex schools. One of the things I had to do was observe lessons.

It is a fascinating task, observing both the teacher and the pupils and how they interact with each other.

I must say the majority of lessons I observed were well prepared and effective. The main problem was often the pitch.

The teacher would sometimes pitch the lesson too high so it was above the head of the pupils, but more often the lessons were not challenging enough for the pupils.

Student teachers would sometimes forget that the lesson was being evaluated not on the erudition of the teacher, but on the learning experiences of the pupils.

Pupils learn by doing things, not by passive listening, perhaps something preachers should consider.

But in doing this work, there was a phenomenon that I observed, especially in schools in socially deprived areas.

That was that I could watch a superb lesson, at the right pitch with interesting activities appropriate to the pupils, but a group of pupils did not engage with it at all.

The teacher did everything right, but gleaned no response from some pupils. From the moment they entered the classroom they were distracted and didn't listen to anything.

They were disengaged, switched off.

The reasons for this are manifold.

Peer group pressure, parents not supportive of education, problems in their personal lives, previous bad experiences of school, the cultural difference between school and home so that school seems an alien environment.

I could go on.

The same can happen in church.

I remember being annoyed at an afternoon baptism service.

Fr Louis was telling an amusing and relevant story and a group of men at the back, who were presumably there against their will, were looking at their phones and paying absolutely no attention.

Of course you can see where this is leading.

The parable of the sower is about Jesus spreading the seed, his word, and some people responding and others not.

Jesus was a good teacher.

Using parables he was able to tell stories that people could relate to.

His listeners all knew about sowers scattering seed.

He may have made them sit up and listen because this sower seemed a rather careless one, scattering seeds on the path, amongst the rocks and in the thorns.

Seed was precious and a good sower would take care not to do that.

But like all good lessons this provided a challenge for the listeners.

It made them think, "What does this parable mean"?

In fact, it has been said that this parable defines what parables are about.

Jesus teaches and his seed, his words will only germinate if the listeners are receptive.

The parable is key to the whole Gospel accounts.

The Gospel is about how people respond to Jesus' words.

And because Jesus is himself "the word" as we know from the prologue to John's Gospel, it is about how people respond to Jesus.

Do the seeds germinate?

Do people receive Jesus so there is a harvest?

Or like the pupils I was talking about earlier are there barriers, which this parable describes as thorns?

Perhaps we should look at ourselves first.

We can ask the question whether the seed, the word, has germinated in us.

The parable talks about the harvest when the seed germinates.

What should we see in the harvest if Christ has germinated in us?

Love, peace, compassion, forgiveness of others, craving for justice, advocating the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden.

If we are confident that our lives show forth these fruits we can be confident that the seed of Christ is sown in us.

That Jesus, the Word dwells in us.

If that list does not readily describe us, perhaps the soil is a bit thin.

We have not listened to the Word, not spent time in prayer, not studied our scriptures.

Or there may be weeds choking the good plants.

We may need to do some weeding.

None of us like weeding, do we?

But we may need to confront our thorns.

We will of course all have different weeds.

For some it may be as Jesus says the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. Letting the aim of being successful in worldly terms get in the way of our spiritual growth.

The weed may be jealousy.

Being jealous of other people's lives or of their gifts.

Resenting someone who does things better than us.

Comparison and rivalry with other people is never helpful.

The weed may be lack of forgiveness.

We all have to forgive people at times and we all have to be forgiven.

If we don't forgive, anger and resentment build up, as we all probably know.

Thinking ourselves better than others is a pernicious weed.

At its worst it can lead to abuse, sexism, racism and so on.

I could go on.

Not all will apply to us, but for most of us, some of them will.

What is stopping the seed, the word of God flourishing in us to produce that bumper harvest?

A question we all need to ask.

Did you notice that St Paul in his epistle is talking about the same thing.

He talks about the spirit dwelling in us.

"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he will give life to your mortal bodies."

And how will that SHOW?

By the fruits of the Spirit, love, compassion, forgiveness, craving for justice, looking out for the downtrodden and oppressed.

If we really do produce the harvest of the Spirit, that harvest will itself produce seeds which will be scattered and we become the sowers.

Because if we show the fruits of the spirit people will see Jesus in us.

And that is how it should be.

We are called prayerfully, faithfully to scatter good news amongst those we meet.

We pray that our lives will show and bring forth that seed.

That is how the word of God is spread.