

Based on Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-23

The parable of the 'sower and the seeds' in Matthew 13 is really a lesson in the mysterious nature of God's grace.

The human heart may be stony or thorny or receptive and will respond to God's grace accordingly. But the seed has within it the power of new life and so in the end, the harvest is safe.

The Christian church has always been faced with the mystery of the Gospel; why some people hear and eagerly respond and others hear and remain either indifferent or openly hostile. What explains the various responses?

Does God choose for some people to be open and others to be disinterested or spiritually 'deaf' or are humans totally responsible for their own 'hearing'? This mystery confused the disciples during the ministry of Jesus and caused a fair bit of anxiety too, amongst the early Christian communities at the time that the Gospels were being written down.

Matthew's text shows this type of struggle, especially in the section from 11:2 to 13:58. From the questions put to Jesus by an uncertain John (11:2-3) to the rejection of Jesus in his home synagogue (13:54-58), Matthew's Gospel examines the reality of the many and varied reactions to the message of God.

The Gospel reading for last Sunday stressed that the knowledge of God is a gift of grace, fitted for 'infants' who don't pretend to be knowledgeable or wise. But our parable this week and how we interpret it, is focussed more directly on the audiences to whom the gospel is being declared. It examines whether people demonstrate outright rejection or an enthusiastic response and it even looks at the people who, for whatever reason, demonstrate a short-lived acceptance of it.

If you take the Matthew Gospel reading listed in the lectionary for last week, which was chapter 11:16-19 and 25-30 (especially the latter verses) together with this week's it is possible to detect the relationship between divine intervention and personal responsibility, in the receiving, understanding and response to God's message. I am talking about the unrelieved tension between God's gracious gift of revelation and the need for an appropriate human response to it. Human understanding is extremely varied and this can sometimes be due to intellectual variations. But the parables were generally

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a sort of tool used by Jesus to make God's message more accessible to people who might otherwise feel a bit lost and excluded. I think that sometimes, human understanding can be selective - i.e. if what is being presented causes a sense of uneasiness or discomfort because it's a bit too near what we know in our hearts to be the truth, then we might profess not to 'understand' because it's easier than coming to terms with how God wants us to change.

In this way, understanding will be even more inextricably linked to response. Even pretending not to understand is a form of response to God's message, albeit a negative response. God offers us many opportunities at different times and places to be 'good seed' and 'good fertile soil'. The former to share our message - God's message - with others and the latter to be receptive to the changes and challenges that God sets before us on our respective journeys of faith and mission. So, as God offers revelation, humanity needs to be responding appropriately by saying 'Yes'!

I think that there are two particular parts of the text this week that deserve a bit of extra attention.

One of these is the way in which the interpretation is linked to the parable and how it increases its impact - especially on the disciples.

The audience for the parable itself is the "whole crowd" (13:2) and its closing words include a wider group: "Let anyone with ears listen" (13:9).

But in 13:10, the immediate audience gets narrower. The disciples don't ask for an explanation of this particular parable but what they get is a symbolic interpretation of it, which is aimed quite pointedly at them!

Verse 18 is quite emphatic and could be paraphrased as "Hey YOU disciples, listen to the parable of the sower!" As people who have been specifically told to listen and hear the parable, they aren't now allowed the luxury of just sitting back and watching other people react to the message.

The text is asking quite bluntly; "How do you hear? What kind of soil are you? Does your hearing lead to understanding? Suddenly the circle of 'followers' are faced with their own quality of hearing God's message. They can't afford to be smug now. Rather than judging the reactions of others, the disciples are forced to examine their own responsiveness to the message of the gospel and whether or not they have shown the 'staying power' that is likely to produce a good harvest?

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The second interesting thing about this parable is the enormity of the harvest. The three types of bad soil are paralleled by three levels of prosperity. Historians believe that a seven to ten fold harvest would have been considered as average. But here the talk is of thirty, sixty and even one hundred fold harvest.

While the disciples may have to ask themselves questions about their own hearing of the Gospel, there is nevertheless some assurance about the ultimate outcome of the sowing of God's word.

The final picture isn't one where birds are snatching the seed sown on the path. It isn't a picture of rootless plants on rocky ground, wilting in the heat or of weak plants crowded out by weeds. It's a picture of a full and very large harvest.

To the original disciples and Matthew's community, the final picture encourages great confidence in God's purposes. Though the numbers are small, the opposition painful and the rejections many, the huge size of the harvest is a reminder of God's blessing and an assurance of a happy outcome. AMEN