

HIW 15.02.2009

### **Mark 4, 3-9**

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times. - He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

A farmer drove out to his fields to sow. It was October, just the right time for his winter wheat, and behind his tractor was his new seed sowing machine.

As he sowed, most of the seed fell on the well-ploughed ground; but some fell on the path alongside the field; some fell onto the stony area at the corner of the field where there was not enough soil to plough, and some fell among the bushes forming a little hedge along its edge.

The next day the farmer took his machine back to the agricultural dealers'. "There's something wrong with it," he said. "It throws the seed all over the place. I can't afford to waste my seed feeding the birds and the fieldmice."

I wonder what kind of parable our Lord would have told if he had lived in the age of mechanisation. There are those who would like to rewrite the Bible to reflect the modern world more, and to make its stories more "relevant" to those living in it. Myself I am very glad that Jesus told stories such as the one in our Gospel reading for today. We are aware that the world has changed more in the last hundred years than in the two thousand years that went before; and yet even today, our children's books are full of pictures of farmyards where contented pigs roam freely and the farmer's wife scatters corn among a flock of happy chickens, with not a battery or an intensive animal unit in sight; and I have the feeling that such archetypal images as that of the sower carrying his basket and scattering his seed across the field with a great sweep of his arm - the ancient method known as broadcast sowing which gave us the word we nowadays use in connection with radio and television – still speak to most of us more clearly than

images that are taken from modern developments and inventions. It is difficult to imagine Jesus telling a parable involving machinery. Because Jesus' parables are about people, and the way they behave, and those are things that have not changed noticeably in the last two thousand years.

Or rather, perhaps, I should say they are about God, revealed through humankind made in his image; and God has not changed in the last two thousand years either – "a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by", as the Psalmist says [Ps.90]. Because perhaps people *have* changed after all, if we compare the sower to my modern farmer with his machine. Or perhaps the contrast between the archetypal sower and the modern farmer simply points to the difference between God's ways and ours. We heard it in the Old Testament reading just now: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord; 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" [Is.55,8-9]. Remember what Pastor Nötzel told us last month in his sermon on the Wedding at Cana [Jn 2]: when God turns water into wine, he doesn't do it by the glassful, it's six hundred litres at a time. When God creates a plant that bears seed, it doesn't just produce enough to reproduce itself; it produces enough to feed the birds and the animals as well – not to mention us humans, who also live from the bounty of nature. It is we, who have domesticated the wild plants for our crops and the wild animals to provide us with milk, eggs and meat, that expect every one of them to be productive, and to produce only for us, without giving anything back to the cycle of nature from which we took them. But when God is the sower, he takes no precautions to ensure that all the seed falls on good ground. We may take it for granted that only productive seed is good seed; but the parable doesn't even say that most of the seed fell on good ground, just that "other seed" did. There is plenty left over for the birds as well, and even if that which falls on the stony ground and among thorns seems to be wasted, God's plan does not exclude such extravagance, and who of us can tell what it may be good for in the great scheme of Creation?

The sower's generosity in not simply ensuring the maximum return for himself reflects Old Testament law. In the Book of Leviticus – the third book of Moses – it is written: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings (*die Nachlese*) of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien" [Lev. 19.9-10]; and one may well hope that there were other rich landowners who did as Boaz did in the Book of Ruth, when he ordered the men harvesting his corn to drop additional ears of corn deliberately and leave them behind for Ruth to glean [Ruth 2,16] – although of course he seems to have had an ulterior motive, as he married her in the end. The whole concept of tithing – of giving away, whether to God or to those in need, one-tenth of everything we earn – is based on the same idea: that even when we say we have *earned* something, it does not mean that we have the right to possess it completely for ourselves, and that justice consists not simply of everybody getting what they deserve, but of everybody having what they need. God's generosity provides enough for all, and that includes our leaving something over for the birds or the fieldmice, as well as the poor and the needy.

In the Gospels, the parable of the sower is followed by an interpretation presented as that given by Jesus to his disciples. I decided not to include this passage in this morning's reading, in order to leave some room for wider interpretation. It is nevertheless difficult to get away from the central element: "The farmer sows the Word." [Mk 4,14] A Bible commentary that I have at home declares: "The sower is Christ himself, of course." I would take the liberty of questioning that "of course", or at least of expanding it by adding that all of us who have once received the Word are also called to be sowers, just as we are called to be the salt of the world, the yeast in the dough, or lamps set on lampstands and not hidden under bushels. All of these pictures tell us that we have not received the word of Christ just to keep it for ourselves, but to make a difference in the world, by practising the love that Christ has commanded us to show to all around us, and by demonstrating that being a Christian, following Jesus, can and does make a difference to us, and can increase the sum of human

fulfilment, yes, and happiness, in this world. To this extent, the text of the hymn we have just sung falls short when it says in v.3, "Listen to my Father's words and then your faith will grow"; it is not just my faith that needs to grow but the fruits of my faith, the effect it has on my life and on the lives of those around me. All right, we must take the words of the verse in conjunction with the words of the refrain: "Tell the world about God's love."

But when we put our hands into our baskets and broadcast our seed across the land, we have to recognise that we do not control what kind of land it is going to fall upon. It is not our task to decide whether it is worth while showing forth the love of Christ in the circumstances or the environment in which we find ourselves. We are not the ones to judge whether the people who surround us in our everyday lives, at home or at work, or whom we encounter wherever it may be, are good or stony ground, or are overgrown with thorns – which according to the interpretation in the Gospel means that they are preoccupied with "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth" [Mk 4,19]. Indeed, seeking to sow only on good ground may be "preaching to the converted", so that our words and our example do not reach the places where they are really needed. There may be those whose souls are parched like rocky ground, or are caught up in the tangle of weeds and thorns that are our daily cares and distractions, whom a word or a loving action at the right time can transform into good ground that produces a crop after all as the Word takes root.

The farmer has certain responsibilities, of course. Firstly, a good farmer will prepare his ground, ploughing, weeding, fertilising, so that as much as possible of it is good ground that the seed is able to flourish in. How can we translate that into the way we live our lives? Perhaps that we cannot expect our message to take root in other people unless our lives are authentic, and those around us can see that what we believe really does make a difference to us. Secondly, the farmer will see to it that he has good quality seed to sow. The Gospel we preach must be a message of life, a message of love, one that frees people to experience redemption in their own lives and not one that shuts them up in a

new imprisonment, either of ritualism or of fear, not one that shuts the kingdom of heaven in men's faces, as Jesus said of the teaching and practice of the Pharisees [Mt. 23,13]. And thirdly, the farmer will take care to sow his seed at the right time of year, when the conditions are favourable to its flourishing. There are times when people are more likely to be susceptible to the Gospel message, and times when they are less likely – in extreme cases, when they are hungry or distressed and the first duty of love is to provide for their needs, as the Bible itself bears witness: "There is a time to speak and a time to be silent," says the Preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes [Ecc. 3,7]. I remember vividly an occasion many years ago, when I was still a bachelor living by myself, and was in bed with flu. The doorbell rang. I went in my dressing gown to open the door, and found two Jehovah's Witnesses wanting to convert me. I told them very clearly that at that moment I wanted nothing else but to get back to bed; but as I was too polite to actually shut the door in their faces, they kept me standing there, in my dressing gown, for about ten minutes. I am afraid their seed fell very much by the wayside.

However, it is clear to every farmer that it may ultimately be beyond all his efforts to ensure that his seed grows and prospers. "We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land; but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand." This does not only apply in such dramatic circumstances as the drought in China that you may have seen the photo of in the newspaper recently, where the parched, cracked and bare earth does not look likely to produce any crop in the foreseeable future, or countries devastated by hurricane or fire. Even in our own gardens, our seeds often simply fail to come up; and so it is with the sowing of the word of God. Whatever our efforts: whether we are successful - whether our seed falls on good ground, among thorns or along the path - is not within our care. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said: "I do not pray for success; I ask for faithfulness." It is our task to bear witness faithfully in the world. Whether the seed that we sow bears fruit lies in God's hands; and as I have already said, we are not even in a position to judge whether what falls on the path or on stony

ground may in fact not be wasted after all, but may nevertheless have a purpose in the incomprehensible complexity of God's creation.

Which leads me to turn my attention away from the sower, and to consider the ground. I said just now that we are all called upon to be sowers of the Word; in practice it may well be the case that most of us see ourselves rather as receivers of it, and prefer to leave the sowing to the professionals. But if that is the case, we must at least give some thought to what kind of ground we are. Now I wonder what the response would be if I were to say to you now: "Hands up – which of you are good ground?" It would seem too boastful to claim to be; yet I hardly think that the Church of Jesus Christ would have survived in the world for 2,000 years if the Word had not in large measure fallen upon good ground, and if that is the case, there is no reason why we should consider this field in which we are planted, whether we call it Petrikerche Kleefeld, Stadtkirchenverband Hannover or Hannover International Worship, to be a less fertile field than the millions of other fields that the Word has been sown on over the centuries. So some of us must be good ground.

But: not all the time. I am sure that even the most fertile of us know, or have known, periods in our lives when we have been stony ground, or ground overgrown with weeds and thorns. We know stony times when the Word does not speak to us, when we have felt ourselves far from God, even separated from him or abandoned by him, times in which everything seems pointless and futile. We have known thorny times; times when there has been so much else to do in our lives, what with the stress of the job, the pressures of the family, worries about money, unemployment or ill health, that we have had no time for the things of the spirit; times when joy in God's word and redemption has been overlaid by cares and distractions. But certain as we are to know such periods of tribulation and distress, just as certainly, I believe, they can pass. These are the times when we need to pray, like Mother Teresa, not for success but for faithfulness. The seed of God may lie dormant in our hearts, like seed in the desert, for many years. When I consider the seed that falls on the path, I have to think of an

African fable that I read many years ago. There was a time of famine, when there was no food left in the land. The people were getting desperate, and in their desperation they appealed to a wise old man to tell them what they should do. He said, "Plough up the pathways." They did so, and all kinds of crops began to grow on the ploughed paths. The ploughing had brought to life the seed that people had dropped there over the years on their way to market. So in our lives too, the hard paths and stony ground can become fertile again when the farmer tends the ground. And in times when we feel ourselves barren and unproductive, we can nevertheless cling to the hope that in due time God will again bring forth a crop from the Word planted in our hearts.

And the most encouraging thing of all is that it needn't be a hundred times what was sown. We are not all equipped to be saints or heroes of the faith. But the sower is perhaps equally content with a yield of thirty or sixty fold, just as the Master who distributed the talents to his servants would have been happy simply to receive the interest on his money, and not necessarily a return of 100%. God does not set us hurdles that are higher than we can jump over. But he does expect that at some time in our lives we should bear enough fruit to make the sowing worthwhile.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts", we read in Psalm 95 earlier in the service. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.