

Midweek reflection 1st October – Sarah Penfold

The sowing and growing parables

‘Each seed is a tiny nugget of life’, so said one of the experts on Gardeners Question Time. A tiny nugget of life which if allowed to will grow into something beautiful, maybe edible or in some other way useful. Perhaps to provide shade or a home for wildlife.

Today we are thinking about the three parables relating to growing. Most familiar is probably the story of the sower and what happened to his seed when it was scattered – on the path, on the rocky soil, among the thorns and on the good soil. This story is included by Matthew, Mark and Luke in their Gospels and all three helpfully explain its meaning. The seed is the word of God which is heard by different people whose reactions resemble those different types of ground where the seed falls from the sowers hand.

All three Gospel writers also tell us about the mustard seed. It begins so small but grows into a substantial bush providing shade on the ground and perches for the birds. A tiny seed with big aspirations.

Only Mark describes the growing process. Man plants, then after the passage of time, the seeds sprout, the plants grow, seed heads grow and ripen, Man harvests.

When these stories were originally told almost everyone had first-hand experience of growing things – without the grain harvest there would be no bread. Historians may tell us of Rome importing huge quantities of grain from Egypt to feed the population there but in most areas to eat meant to grow. Apart from the wealthy there would be no growing with out a specific purpose either food or medicine. The analogies that Jesus used would have been instantly recognised by those first listeners. Today much of our experience of growing is purely ornamental and if our vegetable plot does fail us there is always the supermarket.

Good seed was precious and a good farmer would avoid spreading it in the wrong places as much as possible. But some would be seen to be wasted. Is it wasted? When we talk about Jesus and the Christian life, we cannot be sure who will be listening. We cannot know which word will light that spark in someone’s mind. Things will grow in unexpected places – think of those buddleia bushes that sprout from the upper floors of derelict houses. Older ones of you will remember the ‘bomb site plant’ because it would grow anywhere especially on bomb sites. Younger people know it as rose bay willowherb. It is no more improbable that a word at the right time can spark a relationship with God.

If we were to update this story what would the differences be? Matthew Henry a Bible commentator who wrote originally around 1700 refers to the sower as Christ or his ministers. Today the sower might be compared to a vicar posting a sermon on

You Tube, or his church website. He knows how many times it has been viewed. But not how many of those people actually saw it through to the end, or how many of those were repeat viewings. Some of his congregation may feed back, 'Good sermon Vicar', others may join his congregation. Others still may listen and reflect for years before acting on what they have heard. And others will simply forget.

The mustard seed is so tiny it is hardly noticeable in the soil as it lands. Remember the start of John's Gospel – the light of Christ had come into the world as a helpless baby. A baby who grew into a man who preached about love, and nurturing and consideration for others. A man whose influence was so great that the calendar was fixed around the date of his birth. Like the mustard tree the Christian faith has been a refuge and protection for many in the intervening 2000 years.

Only Mark tells us about the growing seed. The miracle by which the tiny seed 'a nugget of life' planted in some unpromising mud can sprout and flourish without any effort on our part. This made me think about Roger Pitt planting the sunflower seeds out of the bird food not knowing whether or not anything would happen, But what followed was a burst of sunshine in their front garden that not only brought colour to a dark time but memories of holidays in France. Despite the advances of science most of us don't really know how things grow and do any of us know why? Except through the graciousness of a generous God who cares for his planet and the things that live on it.

For me these parables raise the question of whether we see ourselves as the person who plants the seeds or as the ground in which they are planted. I came to the conclusion that we have to start by identifying with the ground itself. The good soil, the people who hear and understand, who are driven by their faith, who selflessly put their efforts into others people's wellbeing. But soil does not remain good for growing year after year. It needs to be refreshed with a fallow year, with manure or some other type of fertiliser. It is our responsibility to seek that refreshment, unlike the growing process it will not simply happen.

It is easy to become the ground near the path, where nothing new can penetrate. Or the rocky ground. Constantly trying new things, then moving on to others without allowing ourselves to be properly rooted. And the thorny ground. Our best intentions overtaken by the matters of the world.

The explanation of the story of the sower makes the point that some seed will produce a hundred-fold, other sixty, other thirty-fold. So it is with us. We will not flourish in the same way and at the same time. In God's kingdom it isn't necessary to be perfect, to produce a hundred-fold. We are invited to play our part, to fulfil our own potential and to add that to the building of God's community.

'Each seed is a tiny nugget of life'. A tiny nugget of life which if allowed to will grow into something beautiful. The kingdom of God is like a seed