

## **Sermon for Sunday 26 September 2021 – Harvest Festival**

Readings: Psalm 65 and Matthew 13: 1-23

Harvest is one of my favourite festivals of the year as we gather in our beautifully decorated churches to praise and thank God for his goodness, his generosity and his grace. We can give thanks for the farmers and growers who have worked so hard to sow, tend and reap their crops which we can then eat. At Harvest Festival we are surrounded by vibrant colours and take in the autumnal scents of flowers, fruit and vegetables.

Harvest is a great opportunity to bring our produce as offerings to God to be used to feed ourselves and others and it's a great opportunity to bring tinned and packet goods to donate to Didcot Foodbank to bless those who are struggling financially.

Some of you will be experienced and keen gardeners who enjoy growing fruit and vegetables to eat yourselves and many of you give away some of your crops and share the bounty with others. Some of you may have taken up gardening recently, especially during the lockdowns when we've spent a lot of time at home. Many of you will have grown your crops from seed perhaps with varying degrees of success!

I'm afraid I have a poor track record of sowing seeds. Either I don't have the right sort of compost or soil, or I don't sow at the correct depth, or I overwater or underwater. For example, I've tried to grow sunflowers without any success at all. Perhaps it was because I sowed them directly into the not-very-good soil or they didn't get enough water or sun. Whatever the reason, I haven't been able to grow a single sunflower in the garden.

Our reading today from Matthew's gospel is all about sowing seeds with varying degrees of success. It's all about God sowing the seed of his Kingdom in the soil. The Kingdom comes to life when the soil receives the seed of the word and the seed begins to germinate and shoot. Theologian Michael Green describes this as 'the marriage of seed and soil'.

Many of the people in the crowd listening to Jesus from the seashore would have been puzzled by the meaning of the story or parable he told. The disciples were also confused, but Jesus explained to them later the meaning of the parable when he took them aside by themselves. Some people of faith in the crowd would have been provoked into thinking about the parable's meaning and would have listened avidly to Jesus talking further about the Kingdom of God during his further parables which followed - on the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast and the pearl.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus talks of the seed landing on four different types of soil – pathway, rock, weedy or thorny areas or good fertile ground - meaning that people react to the word of the Kingdom in different ways.

There are those who are like the path or the track which is hard through being trodden down or driven over. They are impervious to the message and the seed bounces off them.

There are other people who are like the rocky soil. They receive the word of God but there's no depth and the seed soon dies off.

There's another group who are like the soil that fell among thorns and thistles. The word is received but gets choked up by cares of the world, a desire to fit in and be like everyone else.

And finally there are those who are faithful in their response to the word. Their 'soil' is fertile and receptive and produces an abundant harvest.

The parable challenges us too to think about which type of soil we are and how we react to the good news of the Kingdom. I'm sure that we can all identify with all the various types of soil at different times. There might be that time we switched off to God's message when we were sure he was speaking to us. There will be those times when we ducked below the parapet so as not to stand out from the crowd and be different. There will be many times when we find the pressures and the pleasures of life crowding in and choking us – 'the flesh' as Paul calls this in his letter to the Romans.

But there are fruitful times for all of us too. Whatever our type of 'soil' the sower is the same and so is the seed. We may not feel very fruitful but it is for God to give the fruit. We can only pray and serve with obedience.

We might have been 'sowers' ourselves by sharing the good news of Jesus with other people only to find that there was little response or even a hostile reaction. We might well be able to identify the types of soil we have encountered in other people's hearts. It's easy to become discouraged and think that we are ineffective disciples. But remember that in Jesus parable it was clear that most people did not receive the Kingdom at all or if they did, they soon fell away for various reasons. We have to expect that there will be failure – but there are also opportunities for spectacular success as the seed grows and produces an exciting crop in the hearts of people of all ages and the Kingdom in turn grows.

We can offer ourselves to God, asking him to make us fertile, receptive and fruitful. Let's be open to God, the sower, and be surprised by the abundance of the crop as he nurtures the Kingdom in each of us, and in those whom we encounter, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 65 reminds us of the powerful, loving, providing and forgiving God we serve. The final 5 verses remind us of his generosity using words such as 'abundant', 'drench', 'bless', 'crown', 'bounty', 'overflow'. So let us lift our eyes to him, especially when we feel downcast, and trust in him for the growth of his Kingdom. And let's 'shout' and 'sing' for joy as we respond to him this Harvest Festival.

Amen.