

Parables are meant to shock.

Farmer Giles lives in Margaretting. One morning he walks out of his farm house, connects his fully automated seed drill to his tractor and drives off. But then he turns on the drill – and it spews out seed at 300 seeds per metre squared. It spews out seed in the farmyard in front of his house, he turns onto the A12 and his seed drill continues to spew out seed at 300 seeds per metre squared all across the tarmac, he turns off and the seed drill spews out seed at 300 seeds per metre squared across the bridleway until he enters his field where he drives up and down and the seed drill spews out seed at 300 hundred seed per metre squared all across his field What does that make you think? Well it should make you think that Farmer Giles is mad – he is certainly profligate – what a waste. And that is what Jesus's crowd felt too – only a mad farmer would sow seed on stony ground and amongst thistles – what a waste. But that's the point. This is the parable of the Sower – that's what Jesus himself tells us - it is not the parable of the seed and it is not the parable of the good and bad ground.

That means that every sermon you have ever heard which has made you feel guilty about not being good enough ground- about having no spiritual roots, or about being choked by the cares and worries of the world – is not only just plain wrong, but it is worse than wrong – it turns a wonderfully positive and encouraging parable from Jesus into a guilt inducing and negative morality tale.

Now I need to own up and tell you that the Eureka moment when I realise that Jesus called this the parable of the sower did not come to me and me alone - There is an amazing New Testament Scholar over in the USA .. She is an orthodox Jew and she is also the New Testament Scholar at Hartford International University. She has taken the Christian New Testament world by storm and has challenged us all to listen again to the actual words he is speaking – a first Century Jew, speaking to first century Jews, - and she says 'don't just pile all your Christian stuff onto him' – you don't need to – he was quite good enough on his own!

So Jesus is speaking to first century Jews and they knew about farming and about rocky paths, thorny places and good fields – and like us they would have cried back to Jesus –'that's bonkers!'

And he would have said – yes – that's the whole point! It's a parable.

Now one possible interpretation is that God is Farmer Giles – that's possible – it's a very good parable to point out that God is totally profligate with blessings and grace and goodness and loving-mercy.. Of course God is – God loves everyone and causes the rain to shine on the just and the unjust alike and equally. And that would make a very nice sermon – God loves us all, no matter who we are, how good we are or how responsive we are....

But I don't think that is the point of the parable at all. Jesus is talking to his disciples about the need to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom : Repent, believe the Good News, the Kingdom of God is very near.

And here he is instructing the disciples how to do that – 'you are the sower' he is saying to them – so get out there, fire up your seed drill and just sow the Good News of the Kingdom absolutely everywhere - sow it on the paths, and amongst the thorns, sow it down the A12 and across the BridleWay – and of course, sow it in the good field as well - in other words, Jesus is saying to the disciples – get out there and just sow the seed – preach the Kingdom, live the Kingdom, Spread the Good News – and for goodness sake stop worrying about whether or not it will have any

effect - yes, sure – some will fall on deaf ears, some will fall on ears which are swamped by all the other pressures of life – but some – and this is what Jesus is saying – some will fall exactly in the right ground – and you do not know where that is .. so – Jesus says to his followers - sow, sow, sow, - sow in the right season and in the wrong season, sow on deaf ears and on listening ears – because you do not know what God is doing with those people Leave that to God – your task is to sow – be profligate, be extravagant, be ridiculous – be as mad as farmer Giles. Now that has profound consequences for us here at the cathedral - we must just open our doors, put on our services, spend our money quite simply just to be here for everyone – even if the people who come in take us for granted, mess us about – or take what they can get and then walk away - Jesus is saying to us ‘be promiscuous with the love of God’ - and yes that was meant to shock – parables shock remember.. Don’t worry about whether it works or not – just sow, sow, sow ..

But it also has a profound effect for each and every one of us. How many of us here have longed for our friends, or our children, or our grandchildren to have a living faith in Jesus? How many of us have longed for the people we love to know and understand what faith is. God knows we have tried .. we have invited our children to church, we have done our best – but in the end many of them just seem to be able to live their lives without church – without faith – without Jesus. It's hard. We feel guilty – what have we done wrong? Well of course professionally as the Cathedral I think it is probably right that we ask ourselves what have we done wrong and how can we sow the seed of the Kingdom of God into the hearts of the young - But for you - for me as a father who has three lovely children active in making the world a better place, - a social worker sorting out fostering arrangements for some of the most vulnerable children, a daughter who works in an animal rescue charity campaigning to rescue tortured monkeys, bears, apes and others – and a primary school teacher in a deprived part of London - they are all great kids – but they do not go to church - what have I done wrong ? Jesus says to his disciples – that is between God and them – your job, my job, our job is just to carry on sowing the seed. Set up our seed drill and sow on the tarmac if we must - This is the message of the parable of the sower. Conversion is up to God, not to us.

The Very Rev'd Paul Kennington

But ... and there always is a but in a sermon ... we do have to attach the seed drill, and turn on the engine. I have said from many pulpits for many years that I grew up in a generation which proclaimed that you do not have to go to church to be a Christian – that was the mantra in the 1970s. But the problem is that people believed us – and they were wrong. You do need to go to Church to be a Christian – you can be a wonderful person, you can follow the values of the New Testament and many of the teachings of Jesus (although he did teach quite a lot about prayer and about taking the Sacrament of Holy Communion, actually) and I believe you can go to heaven without being a Christian - but .. you cannot be a Christian without going to Church. It is discipleship, not just a state of mind. So every time a church going Christian decides on a cold wet Sunday morning that they would rather stay in bed listening to the Archers omnibus than hear a dull sermon and sing hymns they do not know – they are failing to sow the seed of the Kingdom, because those of us who did get out of bed to hear a dull sermon and sing hymns we do not know will miss you – your chair will be empty – and we will feel discouraged on our own journey ... Please, please do not forget that walking into a church full of praying, smiling, singing, wonderful people is the most uplifting gift we can give to people on a Sunday morning - walking into a half full church of people who are not praying, and smiling, singing and just being wonderful – is pretty demoralising. I am not ashamed to say that one of the greatest vocations Christians have is quite simply to meet together and to enjoy worshipping God – it is infectious, it is uplifting – it is discipleship.

When I was ordained a deacon some 35 years ago I was given a very lacy cotta – that’s a kind of Roman Catholic Surplice – which had been hand crocheted by a 90 year old member of the congregation . She had arthritis which crippled her body, but she had made this cotta for a young man in the congregation who she hoped one day would be a priest - in the end he chose a different path, and he gave it to me – an object filled with prayer, with meaning and to some extent with guilt and regret. And he said to me - When I was 14 years old I entered her church for the first time. None of my family ever went to church – we were not religious. I went to pray for my brother who was dying of Cystic Fibrosis. There was this 90 year old woman. She could hardly walk – and yet – during the Eucharistic prayer, at the point of consecration, every week she knelt on her broken knees in excruciating pain. I don’t know why she did it – he said - she did not need to do it – God did not need her to kneel in pain during communion ... but .. he said .. I did. As I came with my own 14 year old desperate need for faith I saw in her what a life-time of faith looks like. She was 90 years old – she came and she knelt – and she, not the priest, not God the Father, was the Sower in the parable of the Sower...

It is a story which has never left me.