

The Most Inefficient Farmer in Galilee

By Revd Lucy Austin



There is something deeply reassuring about the fact that Jesus would probably never have won “Young Farmer of the Year.”

His farming technique leaves a good deal to be desired. Seeds are thrown with alarming abandon. Some land on a footpath, where the birds enjoy an unexpected lunch. Others disappear into rocky ground or among thorns. Only a fraction reaches fertile soil.

Any agricultural adviser would have had a quiet word.

Yet perhaps that is exactly why Jesus tells the story this way. He isn't giving a masterclass in first-century farming. He's telling us something about God.

We usually call this the Parable of the Sower, and understandably so. Jesus himself explains the different kinds of ground. The path, the rocks, the thorns and the good soil become pictures of the various ways in which God's word is received.

Most of us recognise ourselves in all four.

There are days when faith seems to disappear almost as quickly as it arrived. A sermon, a conversation or a quiet moment of prayer plants something hopeful, only for the week's busyness—or perhaps our own inattentiveness—to carry it away before it has a chance to grow.

There are moments of real spiritual exhilaration too: retreats, pilgrimages, glorious liturgy, unexpected encounters with God. They sustain us for a while until, inevitably, the Monday morning emails, leaking gutters and supermarket queues remind us that we have returned to earth with something of a bump.

Then there are those seasons when the “cares of this world”, as Jesus calls them, quietly suffocate joy. Anxiety has a remarkable ability to occupy every available inch of the soul.

And yet, by God's grace, there are also times when faith does deepen. We discover that we have become a little more patient, a little kinder, a little more trusting than we once were. The harvest is rarely spectacular, but it is real.

All of that matters.

But perhaps we miss something equally important.

When the disciples ask Jesus what the story means, he begins, “Hear then the parable of the sower.”

Not the seed.

Not the soil.

The sower.

And what an extraordinary sower he is.

He seems almost recklessly generous. He makes no attempt to distinguish promising ground from hopeless ground. He simply scatters seed everywhere.

Any respectable farmer listening to Jesus would probably have been shaking his head in quiet despair. "No wonder the Romans are still in charge," he might have muttered.

Of course, neither did the feeding of the five thousand. Nor the wedding at Cana, where six stone jars became something in the region of 150 gallons of rather good wine. God has always seemed remarkably unconcerned about appearing economical.

It is, however, entirely consistent with the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah had already caught sight of this divine extravagance:

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven... so shall my word be... it shall not return to me empty."

Rain, after all, does not fall only on carefully cultivated gardens. It falls on fields, pavements, weeds and wilderness alike.

God's generosity is gloriously indiscriminating.

So too is that of Jesus.

He heals before people have proved themselves worthy.

He eats with those respectable society has already dismissed.

He teaches anyone willing to listen.

He goes looking for the people everyone else has stopped looking for.

St Paul expresses the same truth differently when he tells the Romans that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Grace is not the reward for getting life right; it is the means by which life begins to be put right.

Psalm 65 sings the same tune, delighting in a God who waters the earth, softens it with showers and crowns the year with abundance. Scripture consistently refuses to portray God as careful or parsimonious. God’s instinct is generosity.

Which brings us, rather uncomfortably, to ourselves.

The Church can sometimes be tempted to calculate where its energies are best spent.

We make assumptions about who is interested, who is receptive, who is beyond reach. Individually, we can be just as selective with our kindness, our forgiveness and our patience.

Jesus seems to have had remarkably little interest in such calculations.

He simply kept on sowing.

Perhaps that is the invitation hidden within the parable. Not merely to become better soil, important though that is, but to become better sowers.

Be people willing to love without first asking whether it will be appreciated,
to forgive without calculating whether it has been earned,
to speak words of hope without demanding guarantees of success.

We rarely know where God's word will finally take root. A chance conversation, a small kindness or a simple invitation may bear fruit long after we have forgotten it.

Our task has never been to predict the harvest.

It is simply to keep sowing.

I offer these seeds of challenge first to myself.

But also to all of us.

All of us – as individuals, and as the Church in our own communities.

I offer them without knowing how they will be received.

But trusting that if God has given them to be sown, they will accomplish that which he purposes and succeed in the thing for which he sent them.

Much love and many blessings to all.

LucyA