

As you are by now well aware, my gardening skills are somewhat limited. The one aspect of gardening that does give me pleasure is vegetable gardening – not that I am very good at it but I do get a thrill out of eating my own rhubarb, salads, peas, beans and, even one year, the odd carrot.

So when we moved into the current Rectory just over ten years ago, I set to work on an area at the end of the back garden that had been separated off as a vegetable patch.

Back in those days the soil was quite a heavy clay, which meant it was hard to dig, hard to drain. Over the years of digging, weeding out roots of briar, scutch grass, bind weed, nettles and other undesirables, putting in garden and kitchen compost as well as manure the soil has now broken down and become much easier to work and more productive.

This morning we read as our Gospel reading the parable of the sower. It is one of those parables that would have spoken into the lives and experiences of his hearers. If they weren't farmers themselves the farmer sowing his seed would have been a familiar sight. We all know (at least I certainly do) of seeds that do and seeds that don't strike root and produce.

As Jesus tells the story, and enlarges on it later to the disciples, the story addresses the age old problem of why some people respond to Jesus' teaching and some do not. The temptation is for us who are more confident in our faith to look down on those who aren't, or those who have fallen away.

The parable itself ends with, ‘Let anyone with ears, listen.’ But then later on, when he is just with the disciples, Jesus says, ‘Hear then the parable of the sower.’ He puts the matter directly to them; ‘How are you hearing this?’ Not why aren’t others but how are you hearing this?

That puts the question back on me. How do I hear? What sort of soil am I in which God can plant his seed? Does my hearing lead to an understanding of what Jesus is talking about? I go back to my vegetable garden. Over the years I have had to work at the soil in that patch of ground, to make it more productive, more receptive to the seeds, to the seedlings I plant in it.

In my own following of Jesus, I must be prepared to do a bit of cultivation myself – setting aside some of that most precious commodity, our time. Time to be quiet, time to be still. I’m not talking of elaborate spiritual exercises – just finding space, finding time to be still.

Maybe something that has come out of this prolonged period of lock down, of enforced inactivity, is that we have learned we don’t have to rush all the time, we don’t have to fill every moment of the day with activity – there is a time to rest, to reflect, to pray, to give God the soil in which to plant his seed.

I know that we have only just started into the season of Trinity. On the Sunday on which this season ends we have that lovely Collect associated with Bible Sunday:

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,

to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

I love the way in which those words roll off the tongue:-
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,

Take time, to reflect, to savour, to absorb.

Returning to the parable, there is the final outcome of the harvest, 100 fold, 60 fold, 30 fold. The farmer of those days would have felt he was doing well if he got a harvest that was 7 or 10 fold. So, the final scene is not of birds snatching away seed on the path, rootless plants from seeds falling among the rocks, withering in the scorching sun, spindly stalks smothered by weeds but of a rich bountiful harvest. To the original disciples who were so few among so many, Matthew's community dwarfed by its surroundings, the final scene is an encouragement to great confidence in God's purposes. Though their numbers are small, the opposition hard to take, the rejections of their message painful, the remarkable size of the harvest is a reminder of the riches of God's blessing.

The writer of the Letter of James tells us: 'Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.' *James 4:8*. Spend time in his presence and God will take what we have to offer and work in it and through it. I recall as a young curate talking to the late Canon Billy Wynne. Billy had just gone to St Ann's and had started

their daily lunchtime communion services. I asked him how many he was getting. I have never forgotten his reply. ‘Brew,’ he said, with a patient smile on his face, ‘I will plant the seed – God will give the increase.’ And a ministry started that continues to this day.