

Sixth Sunday after Trinity | 12 July 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist

Genesis 25.19-34 Psalm 119.105-112 Romans 8.1-11 Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

Our recent weather has reminded many of us of the heatwave of 1976, fifty years ago. I am conscious of it being deeply rooted in my own memories. That year cricket pitches were rock hard and bouncers could be bowled at will, and as an opening bowler, that suited me just fine. During that heatwave I passed my driving test. Best of all, a few days later I left the school I loathed. That was one of the happiest days of my life and I remember it well.

During the summer of '76 I was able to pick up casual work on a local farm and I loved that. Gathering the hay or collecting straw bales was satisfying work and gave me some income. It also meant I was able to learn how to reverse trailers – a skill which served me well in a later job.

As a child I had lived close to several farms, and we were used to seeing cows on the road in front of our house as they were being moved to or from milking. None of this is surprising given that I have lived most of my life in Derbyshire. Even now, whatever our perception here in the city, only six or seven percent of land in Derbyshire is built on. This is very much a farming and rural county.

Despite having worked on farms, the farming in today's gospel seems unfamiliar. The farming methods depicted by Jesus have nothing in common with any farming I ever did. And in the 50 years since, farming has changed beyond recognition. Anyone who listens to The Archers will be aware that farming is a constantly changing landscape. Farm life today is way, way different from half a century ago and it is even less surprise that there is little resemblance to rural life in first century Palestine. And therein lies a problem. The whole point of parables was to use familiar pictures and ideas to expose and unpack other ideas. But we are not part of the crowd stood in an inlet of the Sea of Galilee in the first century AD. We are the products of another place and another age. The risk is that we hear a story and think we understand it but we may well have been blindsided. We need to be alert to what we do not know. For instance, Palestinian farmers at the time of Jesus would sow seeds and then plough them into the soil in contrast to modern farmers here preparing the land before setting the seed.

Fr Nadim Nasser is a Syrian priest ministering in the Church of England whose book, *The Middle Eastern Jesus*, helps us see Jesus in his own world with less of the assumptions of our world.

Fr Nadim reminds us that the parables of Jesus are stories set in everyday life, the everyday life of people living 2,000 years ago and two and half thousand miles away. He explains that Jesus uses parables not to give us easy answers or tell us what to do but "because he wanted to give us the task of exploring the journey of God with humanity." They come from the storytelling culture of the Levant that Fr Nadim grew up in, and he reminds us that Jesus uses parables to share something of the culture of God. We are warned against looking for simple definitions of the term parable or of single explanations of a parable; rather they can be open to different interpretations.

In today's gospel we are looking at two parables or perhaps the same one but with two different meanings. Of the two it is the second one which is clear; "The seeds are the word of God; the different soils on which they land represent human hearts or lives." (p.104) Jesus gives the disciples this simple allegorical explanation in private.

As the scholar John Dear suggests, one approach to this parable is prayer – to ask daily for grace to become people of good soil who bear good fruit for God. This gives us an understanding of the version of the parable which Jesus shared privately with his disciples. That is one approach.

So now, let us revisit the parable told in public, conscious now that the parables are God centred, a tool to unwrap the culture of God. Fr Nadim suggests that in this parable the field is divided into four sections, a path, a rocky patch with shallow soil, an area covered in thorns and the good part with fertile soil. The sower distributes into every area – none is disregarded. There is no hint of the efficiency or focus on maximising profit necessary to modern farming. In God's economy the crop is so abundant overall that the loss in the poorer areas is completely overshadowed. Here we catch a glimpse of the reckless generosity of God "whose word flourishes despite humanity's failings." This reading places the sower at the centre of the parable not us. Jesus goes into every part of the field and the focus is on the fruitfulness of the field.

Instead of dwelling on the seed and how it does depending on what sort of soil we are, we are focussed on the radical, unlimited love of God and on the transforming power of the resurrected Christ in our midst. Instead of wondering what sort of soil

we are and how we respond to the word of God, we are looking to God whose love is beyond our imagining. Whatever part of the field we are we are showered with God's love. As Paul reminds us in our reading from the letter to the Romans, God has set us free from the "law of sin and of death" (Romans 8.2). In Christ God has paid the cost, so consequentially, the Spirit of God dwells in us. And if the Spirit of God lives in us, the abundant love of God, the unconditional love of God, which has been shown to us should also radiate from us. And no one should imagine that unconditional love is easy, it needs the Spirit of God at work in us. All too often the love we show to someone depends on what we get back in return, whether in the short-term or long-term.

Our reading from Genesis tells of the descendants of Isaac and of some seriously flawed relationships. After a long wait to have children Isaac and Rebekah become parents to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. They are fierce rivals from birth, and this can hardly have been helped by Isaac preferring Esau and his wife Rebekah preferring Esau's twin brother Jacob. Later on, when Esau is famished and desperate to eat, Jacob only gives his twin some bread and lentil stew in exchange for the coveted birth-right. There is no unconditional love here. These might be the patriarchs, but this is not model family life in which love abounds. However, it does reflect the transactional nature of human relationships in our world today. We do not scatter love freely and in every area of the field. We are selective; like Isaac and Rebekah we have our favourites. We lack generosity and like Jacob we want a good return.

We do not have to establish our own worth. We are unconditionally and generously loved by God. That love has set us free from the law of sin and death in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Spirit of God dwells in us. This all frees us to live without obsessing about how others perceive us, or what we can get out of others. This should be reflected in our personal relationships. It should be reflected in how we look to order the affairs of the world. But as with the parables of Jesus there are no easy answers. Individually and collectively we share "the task of

exploring the journey of God with humanity.” This is a long-term and on-going challenge for us, but the starting point is for each of us to accept and embrace the lavish, unconditional love of God. Amen.

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