

Sowing Means Knowing
(From the Sexagesima Gospel)
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 121

4 And when much people were gathered together, and were come to him out of every city, he spake by a parable: 5 A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. 6 And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. 7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. 8 And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. 9 And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be? 10 And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand. 11 Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 12 Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. 13 They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. 14 And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. 15 But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

In order for the Church to sow the seeds of the Gospel, it must know several things in advance before undertaking this crucial assignment. Today's text from St Luke viii. provides us with insights that will assist us in this God-appointed task in our day.

As with any effective gardening, one must be aware of the properties of the seed that is being planted, when it should be introduced into the ground, what kind of soil is the best guarantee for its success, and what sort of aftercare will be needed to nurture growth. Taking a realistic look around us with such parameters in view is a courageous task in this day, because conditions for the propagation of the Gospel have been drastically altered. We can't afford to use outmoded means to accomplish the same purpose. They just won't work. This means changes, changes for us who are sowing the seeds. And change, as well all know, comes hard, and at considerable cost.

But let's ask ourselves a searching question, before we even get into this matter of evangelism, because that really is the appropriate term for this work which has been given the Church. Do we realize that none are exempted from this matter of Gospel agriculture? We don't all have the same part, to be sure. Some specialize in planting, some in watering, some in harvesting, even though it is God alone that *gives the increase* (1 Cor. iii.6.). But every life lived for Christ is planting seeds among family, friends, and community, whether in deed or in word. Love and faithfulness and consistency provide the water. And the result, sooner or later, will surely be a harvest. This is the work of the Church. A church lacking this identifying feature cannot be a church in the biblical sense.

The seed we have been given to sow is filled with dynamic potential. Whenever it finds fertile soil, it yields truly remarkable results: changed lives, hearts set free, and joy, peace, and purity. The seed is without fault. It never grows stale, or old, nor is it successfully hybridized,

and cannot be “genetically modified”. And God will unfailingly do His part in bringing the seed to fruition if it is properly handled by those given the job of distributing it.

Let’s assume that we are, each and all, willing to contribute our share of this precious labor toward such a wonderful end. We must now examine the conditions we face within that great, unruly, uncertain, and unpredictable wilderness which is the contemporary terrain within which we are called to labor. Like the sower in today’s text, we are called to generously scatter the Gospel seed everywhere. We are literally “broadcasting” it in the hearts of all whose lives in any way encounter our own. Jesus reminds us that those hearts may be likened to various kinds of soil, and the quality and extent of the harvest will be very much dependent upon where the seeds land.

So what of the fields, today? What do they look like? First of all, one might say they have been poisoned. It’s as if all sorts of trash, chemicals, and alien matter have been ground together and plowed deeply into the soil substrate. It neither looks right nor smells right. Yes, it has been polluted, with every possible effort made to make it useless for Gospel implantation. The minds and hearts of men are filled with the confusion of endless modes of entertainment, the disconnecting influence of the media, and a host of opinions from a host of different sources. All of this parades through the conscious mind proudly and arrogantly, with head held high, trampling underfoot simple and quiet things like respect for the virtues, and a tender conscience, which once provided a potentially fertile ground for matters of faith.

Secondly, the soil has been hardened. Good loam is ruined by the presence of clay. Underway is a hardening process that has been actively encouraged by anti-biblical, anti-Christian influence often made effective under the imposing banners of modern science and knowledge. “The Bible cannot be believed nor trusted. There is no evidence for its claims” is the cry, and when Christians in effect run up the white flag of surrender, by not knowing how to counter these claims, and then resign themselves to giving up, the world turns from the church to other sources of truth. People are in desperate need of knowing how to address matters of the heart which can only be healed by the medicine of Christ: guilt for sins, assurance of after-life issues, whether there is absolute truth, whether they can place their full trust in God, and not be let down. To turn away from God toward man is to turn to futility, disappointment, and disaster. But the music offered to accompany this process gets louder and louder, and the distractions multiply.

Lastly, the soil has been stolen. There is very little of it of any value left. I remember a line from a Scrooge McDuck comic book from my childhood. Scrooge was the consummate capitalist, always looking for a way to make a buck: “Buy dirt cheap, and sell it high!”, it said. There is a company sign on the outskirts of Bangor that proclaims, “Dirt Works”, and I keep thinking, “Indeed, it does!” The good, deep, rich soil of the American heart has sold itself for money. The sale of the soul of this nation has been done so quickly, and the price offered has been so cheap, it really has been a steal. The buyers have been entrepreneurs, doing what entrepreneurs do. But

Americans haven't had the nerve to resist them. And even though the terms were cheap, the price to be paid ultimately will be great, indeed, for it is very hard to retrieve a bartered soul.

So what are we to do? If I have correctly described the condition of the land to which we, as seed sowers, are called to work in, then we have a daunting assignment. We will not be able to rely on tried and true methods, because the significant changes that have occurred have not yet permitted the development of alternative means. We will have to be both creative, and committed. Creative, because the "wheel hasn't yet been invented" that will provide inroads into the culture as it is. And committed, because getting there will be a matter of trial and error, of patience, perhaps of many disappointments and a few very bright and happy successes. It is pioneers' work. But it certainly isn't a place for complacency and idleness.

I do not pretend to have the answers, but I am anxious to find them. I can, however, make some suggestions. I believe that *authenticity* is a key: is the life of the Church-going Christian as thorough a human representation as he can make it of the Christ he purports to represent? We are being watched. How do I carry myself in public? How do I deal with setbacks and difficulties? If I am caught unawares, say, by a circumstance, what is my reflexive reaction? I believe that our lives certify our profession, and this sort of example is demonstrated only over extended periods of time. Yes, people are indifferent. Yes, there are many factors hardening the hearts of family and friends. But the love of Christ proven by a life lived for Him is still "the real thing", and good hearts are still searching for it.

If a local church could collectively demonstrate that the Lord is indeed present among them when they gather, then their witness within the community will be especially bright, because unity in love is an especially powerful and convincing picture. I sincerely hope that God will provide many ways for us to be such a testimony, even though we assemble here from such a diverse group of communities, and for limited periods of time.

Faith in God instructs us to open our eyes fully in order to view without fear the conditions in which we are placed. We cannot go back to the past, nor can we expect that the very unsettling changes in process will just go away. We are called to be active agents for Christ's work in the midst things just as they are.

We must be students of the times, prepared to make changes appropriate to the circumstances.

To quote two more of our Lord's sayings:

John 4:36...he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together. 37 And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth. 38 I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours.

Luke 10: 2 Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.