

SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY 2006  
THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER  
Fr. Richard Wall  
Saint Clements Church, Philadelphia  
[www.s-clements.org](http://www.s-clements.org)

Perhaps the best known form of Our Lord's proclamation is his use of parables- short stories that he told to bemused villagers who gathered around him in little clumps, bringing their sick to him on stretchers and eager to hear him talk about Israel's consolation. That's why they are designed within the worldview of the Jewish villages at that time, using well-known Jewish images of vines, vineyards, sheep, shepherds, sowers and so on. Jesus, of course, used these traditional pictures in new and profound ways, inviting his listeners to see their world in a new way, with Jesus himself as being the fulfilment of Israel's hope.

The parables are, though, more than stories. Not only do they describe the Kingdom of God, they are part of the means of bringing it to birth. They don't just give us something to think about, they invite us into the new world that is being created, and warn us of the dire consequences of refusing this invitation.

The Parable of The Sower is one of the strangest- probably because there is no uniform agreement on what it originally meant. We're all familiar with the idea that we are supposed to somehow relate ourselves to one of the four groups of seed and ask ourselves what sort of Christian we are. That's fine, but this explanation completely misses the deeper point in the parable- that the story of the sower is also the story of Israel- but with the ministry of Jesus as being the new and unexpected fulfilment of that story. The first three groups of unsuccessful seeds stand for the prophets, rejected by Israel. The seed that fell on good ground stands for Jesus, who "bare fruit an hundred-fold". Throughout the Old Testament "seed" is a metaphor for the true Israel, who will be vindicated when God finally acts, and will be "sown" again in her own soil and in her own land. And so, when Jesus told this parable, he was saying that this good seed was being sown before his listeners' very eyes. That their exile was now over and that the true Israel was being created God. God's sowing of his word defies the thorns and briars and renews all of creation. The time foretold by the prophets is at last coming to birth.

But the parable also warns us that God doesn't always act in the way we expect him to; the final harvest will not come about in the way we might imagine. The three batches of unsuccessful seed do not necessarily stand for a history or chronology. God is acting and God is sowing His word- but much of it will go to waste, be eaten by birds or be lost in the wilderness. The harvest of the future, however, will be great. Think of the Parable of the Great Banquet- the party will go ahead, the house will be full, but the original guests will not be there. Judgement and mercy take place at the same time. In a sense Jesus is warning us: those who reject the seed that is being sown call down judgement

on themselves. He is telling us that his work is the climax of the story of Israel. He will succeed where the prophets failed. He will be rejected- but salvation will not be thwarted but, rather, fulfilled. We're being told that Jesus is the Messiah- but a very different kind of saviour to the one expected by the Jews. Not a mighty warrior- but a man whose success would lie in his failure.

Perhaps now the odd verse in the middle of this morning's reading makes a little more sense:

*Unto you 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.*

Isaiah had told how Israel's path to mercy would lead her through devastating judgement, and that this judgement would come through not seeing and not understanding. However, the sign of mercy in that judgement would be a holy seed. So the Parable of the Sower tells Israel's story of rejection, judgement and great renewal on the other side of judgement. This mystery is the plan of how God would rescue his people- not in a blaze of glory, but through the sowing of His Word, the word through which Israel and the world would be renewed.

Here we find some profound truths of our own Christian journeys. So very often our path to salvation and mercy involves a process of judgement and mercy. So very often God does not act in the way we want him to, with great displays of his mighty power, but slowly, unexpectedly and mysteriously. In a sense, just as so many failed to understand or see what Jesus was proclaiming, so we too have to pass through darkness, through our own Good Fridays, through our own time of spiritual blindness, if we are to be resurrected and renewed. We have to know what it feels like for our prayers to be unanswered and our comforts gone before we can then appreciate and feel the love and mercy of God.

Perhaps most importantly this parable speaks to us of the choices we face when we are confronted by God. When we meet Jesus Christ, one way or another our lives will change; we will never be the same again. For we will either embrace the love of God and seek his forgiveness and love or we will reject Him, and so bring judgement down on ourselves. In this morning's parable we see that some people accept God; others reject Him. Those who hear do not necessarily respond with faith. Being given the seed is not the start and end of the story- it's what we do with it that counts. Faith begins with hearing, but shows itself through obedience and fidelity. Faith is no instantaneous reaction but a process of faithfulness and perseverance, immune to times of testing and the distractions of worldly existence.

Our guarantee, our promise, our means to endure is the sacrament that we prepare ourselves to receive this morning and the mass that we celebrate. For in giving us His life, in giving us His own body and blood, the very fullness of Christ, God is assuring us that there is no situation, no person, no action beyond redemption. The sacrament is our reason for knowing that nothing can block God's love for us. It is our promise that in the midst of failure and despair we can still be raised to new life with God. In this glorious foretaste of heaven we see the radiance of hope in every direction that we gaze- for whenever and wherever the mass is faithfully celebrated there is the kingdom of God, there is his love and forgiveness and there we find his mercy.