

HARVEST FESTIVAL

"Some seed fell on rich soil and produced their crop, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty." Matt. 13:9.

The New Testament tells us many things about Jesus. There are stories about his birth, his death and resurrection - about his healing ministry, and about his miracles - walking upon the water, stilling storms, feeding thousands of people on a few loaves and fishes; and so on.

There is also evidence of his teaching and preaching. He taught, says St. Matthew in 7:29, as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. He re-interpreted the teaching of the law of Moses and of the great prophets - Isaiah and Ezekiel - in the section of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, known as the 'sermon on the mount'. The main thrust of his teaching, however, was devoted to the coming of God's rule in the world - God's Kingdom, and his teaching concerning the Kingdom of God was contained in his parables.

Both St. Matthew and St. Luke claim that the preaching of Jesus began with the words "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." The only teaching he gave us about prayer was the Lord's Prayer in which we pray "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven". The parables of Jesus explain the meaning of the phrase, "kingdom of God".

The parable which was read in our New Testament lesson is one of the most popular of Jesus' parables - it is always sung about and preached about at harvest time. The poet John Betjeman wrote a very telling poem about harvest time which he called "The Diary of the Church Mouse". The mouse complains that at the one time of the year when the church is full of goodies

- it was invaded by strange harvest mice from outside who devoured what he regarded as rightly his!

I quote;

"Within the human world I know
Such goings on could not be so,
For human beings only do
What their religion tells them to.
They read the Bible every day
And always, night and morning pray,
And just like me, the good church mouse,
Worship each week in God's own house.
But all the same it's strange to me
How very full the church can be
With people I don't see at all
Except at Harvest Festival."

That is a parable about church attendance. The parable of the sower is not about the church. It is not meant to get at people who don't attend church regularly. The parable of the sower is about the kingdom of God.

"We plough the fields and scatter" we sing - ignoring the fact that in first century Palastine the farmers scattered seed before ploughing. Hence some fell on stony ground, some fell among thorns and so on but some fell on rich soil and produced a great harvest. Despite past and present apparent failures - despite the lack of success of God's work throughout the history of Israel, God's kingdom will ultimately triumph. So often God's world seems to be reeling out of control as we hear of natural disasters which we have witnessed in China and in the Carribean in recent days. It is difficult for us to believe that it is God's world and that he is "working his purposes out." Even the fundamental law of evolution - the selection of the strong who

survive at the expense of the weak who perish - seems to be indifferent to the love of God. Is there any point at all in praying for a better world when God seems incapable of intervening in his creation? Is there no wonder that so many good people lose their faith? But the story of Jesus is also a story of apparent failure. His attempt to heal the sick and preach the Gospel ended in tragedy - or at least what the world of unbelief interpreted as tragic failure.

But the parable of the sower rings out in defiance of all despair and loss of faith - "some seed fell on rich soil and the harvest was a hundred fold". Ultimately it is God's world and his kingdom will prevail.

I close with yet another modern parable. Its a story of an old man who was walking along the beach. He observed a young man in the distance, approaching him. The young man appeared to be bending down every few minutes to pick something up and to throw it into the sea. As they approached each other, the old man realised the other man was throwing jelly-fish into the sea. There were thousands of jelly-fish on the beach, stranded and dying. The old man said, "you're wasting your time - the task is hopeless. What you are doing is making very little difference to this tragedy.

" The young man picked up yet another jelly-fish, threw it back into the sea and said, "it made a big difference for him."

AMEN