

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> July

Isaiah 55:10-13

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

On Saturday morning we are going to be taking a look at the Bible – amongst other things how it came to be as it is; how the various ‘books’ of the Bible work together; what is the overall story and how it is best for us to read it- how it can help us on our Christian journeys.

The first thing that we need to understand – perhaps especially with the Old Testament – is that on the whole the various ‘books’ are very unlike books we know today. Pick up a book from your bookshelf at home today – whether it be a novel or a non fiction book – and I would guess that much time was spent in planning it and putting it together so that it was consistent and coherent as a whole. The OT ‘books’ are, by and large, not like that.

Take Isaiah for example.

Isaiah was a prophet – someone who spoke the word of God as revealed to him in different situations. Note that – someone who SPOKE the word of God. He heard God speaking to him and knew the message had to be passed on – sometimes to the King, sometimes to the priests, sometimes to the nation as a whole. And the message was passed on by him speaking it, and then others repeating the message.

The ‘book’ of Isaiah then is a collection of sayings or sermons if you like. They have been assembled together in some kind of order, but they were never said with the finished book or the finished order in mind. This is no planned book of wise sayings; rather it is a collection of sermons which are put together in some kind of order which makes some sense, but without clear reference to the contexts of the sermons. In other words we have the sermons, but its not always obvious what was going on in the country or the world at the time – the things that Isaiah was addressing.

Prophecy, we should remember, is not about foretelling the future. It can be about ‘speaking truth to power’, challenging those in authority that what they are saying or doing is not in line with what God wants. An example we may have come across recently could be when the Archbishop of Canterbury, talking in the House of Lords recently about the illegal migration bill, said amongst other things that Britain is

better than this and talked of Jesus's teaching that we should welcome the stranger. (And just like Isaiah he was ignored by many of those in power!)

Prophecy can also be about bringing hope into difficult situations, hope not of human origin but from God. Words of encouragement from God not so much to individuals or leaders, but to a community, to a people who have no other reason for hope.

Today's short excerpt from Isaiah falls into that second category. It comes from a section in the 'book' where the prophecies, the sermons, are addressed to the people of Judah while they are in exile in Babylon. They are prophecies which bring hope to those in exile. Not a wishful thinking hope, but the certainty of something happening. Like when we see the first daffodil shoots poking through the frosty ground in January – the hope of Spring coming as we know it surely will.

Our gospel reading is the well known parable of the sower – much loved of Sunday school lessons. Perhaps a better title would be the parable of the soils or the parable of the word of God because that is where the emphasis is.

Jesus likens the word of God – the message of hope of a new future in the Kingdom of God – to seed which is spread on the ground in hope of it growing.

Not all the seed takes root. Some falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some amongst weeds and none of these seeds grow. But the seed which falls on the good soil grows and bears much fruit.

In the interpretation Jesus likens the seed to the word of God, the word he is speaking. But I wonder if we could say it could also refer to himself. John's gospel begins with describing Jesus as the word made flesh – *the word became a human being and lived among us* is The Good News Bible's translation. Maybe the parable could be about people rejecting Jesus or welcoming him – they are free to choose.

Not everyone, then, receives the word, receives Jesus, with joy. Sometimes the seed sprouts but has no opportunity to grow and develop. Much seed never even gets that far, but is eaten by birds. But that seed which does take root grows abundantly. Those who hear the word and respond; those who trust in Jesus and follow him grow in themselves and also produce more seed which will grow further. The word will spread to more and more people. The Christian message will spread.

Traditionally we have seen the parable as a warning to us to ensure that we receive the word of God, respond to it and allow it to grow in our lives. That we don't get choked by thorns, or allow distractions of life to stop us responding to the word.

But we could alternatively see it as a message of hope. The word of God WILL grow, will bear fruit and will spread. Even though many people might ignore it and many might oppose it, in those who allow it to grow and thrive the word will bear fruit which will then take root in others and grow further. It's a message of the importance of looking at the big picture, looking beyond the things that don't go well and see the things that do – those places where hope is being turning to reality..

So we see a connection between this parable and the message of Isaiah from all those years before.

There's a phrase in the message that Isaiah speaks which says something about the words from God that he is speaking. The phrase promises that the words will be heard by some and taken to heart, even though others might ignore them. Isaiah says *"the word shall not return to me empty but shall accomplish that which I purpose"*.

I suspect that this phrase was a great encouragement to Isaiah. It essentially says that there **will be** people who listen and respond. You're not doing all this in vain. You not wasting your time. Even if it doesn't feel like anyone is paying attention the message, the word will get the result God intends. That's a great encouragement to any preacher I can tell you!

And that resonates with the parable. Some people didn't listen; some opposed the message; some didn't catch the real meaning. But some of the seed took root – some people heard and responded to the word, to Jesus. So the sower was not discouraged. As long as some people responded that was enough - *the word did not return to the sower empty but accomplished that which was purposed.*

An encouragement not just to Isaiah, but to all who speak out the word of God.

For most of us, I guess, the very thought of being like Isaiah and speaking out God's word fills us with dread. We can probably picture someone standing in the middle of New Street in Birmingham, dressed in a dark suit and with a huge Bible in their hand, and with a sandwich board declaring 'the end is nigh' by their side – and no one taking any notice at all. That fills me with horror too.

But I am certain that's not what this speaking the word is all about.

We have already seen that 'the word' could refer to Jesus himself as in the prologue to John's gospel.

So what if for us this speaking the word is more about living out our faith, showing Jesus to those around us by the way we live as well as the things we say. This is not preaching on the streets or from a soapbox, it is rather living out the kinds of lives Jesus wants us to live. Living our ordinary everyday lives with the power of Jesus within us. Making a difference in the community we live. By our actions and by our words.

Being people of peace – those who seek to bring harmony and reconciliation; those who look out for the lonely and suffering; those who put others first; those who seek to change the way the world works. .

Or being people of prayer – those who offer to pray for family, friend or neighbour. Praying in the privacy of your own home, or better if you can praying with the one who needs prayer. Simple prayers – no need for complicated words.

Or people of conversation. Talking about how our faith helps us – maybe something like - I don't know why there is so much suffering in the world, but in my experience knowing God helps me during the difficult times.

Or people of invitation – inviting our friends or neighbours to a remembrance service, to a carol service at Christmas, to a Quingo evening or a cream tea - whatever. Being people who want to share what we have.

Those around us may not always warmly welcome what we do or what we say. Our letters to the MP about God's concern for the environment may be ignored; our offers of help or prayer for our neighbour may be spurned; our words of hope to a friend may not be appreciated. But the promise in these readings is that this will not always be the case. Some people will accept our offers; some people will rejoice in what we say; and the small things we do or say will help others take their first steps on their journeys of faith or help make the world a better place. Our efforts will not be wasted.

So as you sow seeds; as you speak words of hope may you be encouraged by the things that go well and not discouraged by the things that don't. And may you know, of course, that as you do so God will always be with you.