

## What sort of soil are we for God's seed?

What strikes me about Jesus' parables are their clarity and simplicity. Today's theme can be seen in stark terms? What sort of soil are you? For God's seed! Are you of the path or stony ground; the soil choked by thorns or the good soil? Echoes of Jesus' other words: "I am the real vine and my father is the gardener. He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit and he prunes every branch that does not bear fruit so that it will be clean and bear more fruit." (John 15:1-2)

Jesus speaks to each of us. As people of God, we are members of God's Church and community here in Aylesford and Eccles. But Jesus says: "I am the vine you are the branches." The Divine Gardener treats each branch. He sows his seed onto individual plots of soil. Denis Duncan, in his Daily Telegraph meditation: *Divine Arithmetic*<sup>1</sup>, writes that although being a Christian is a corporate thing the ultimate question we face about our faith, its reflection in our relationships and lives and relationship we have with Jesus, is resolved only in our individual encounter with God.

The speaker, addressing a group of over-confident, high-achieving, business students, had a 5-litre, wide-mouthed glass cookie jar and filled it with 12 or so fist-sized rocks. When the jar was full to the top, and no more rocks would fit in, he asked them: Is the jar full? They all shouted "Yes!" "Really," he said, reaching for a bucket of gravel which he poured into the jar, shaking the gravel down between the rocks. He asked again, "Is the jar full?" More cautiously the students replied, "Probably not!" "Good" he said, reaching for some sand that he put into the jar in the same way. Again he asked; this time they said, "No". Good he said, grabbing a jug of water and filling the jar to the brim. "What is the point of this illustration?" he asked. A student replied: "No matter how full your life, schedule or diary is, you can always fit more things into it!" Most agreed with him but were they right? "No", said the speaker, "The point is: if you don't put the big rocks in first you'll never get them in at all."

These confident, high-flying students focused on more work, action, meetings, tasks, more ... leading to greater job and life satisfaction and achievement. Maybe that is the answer to a richer, more productive soil. The illustration says otherwise. Having room for the big things is crucial. If we see the question: what sort of soil are you (?) in this context, what are the big rocks you think you should put first into your jar?

Clearly Jesus tells us we must be united in him. Tom Wright, in his book, *Following Jesus*<sup>2</sup>, claims that the whole amazing story of Jesus is given to us to be our story as we follow him. William Barclay outlines 2 things laid down about us being a good disciple. First it enriches our own life, contact with Jesus makes us a richly nutritious soil; second we bring glory to God; the sight of our life turns other people's thoughts to God, who waters the soil and provides the seed. It is said, apparently, that it is a very frustrating experience trying to get half-full Christians to overflow. But overflow we must if we are to glorify God in the way he deserves and become his enriched soil.

Hang on a moment! Surely references to 'enrichment', 'overflowing' and 'glorifying' are overplaying it a bit! If we are cautious and careful we can be that good soil that Jesus wants us to be. "Everything in moderation" is the familiar phrase. It sounds philosophical, even biblical. If I eat in moderation I will not have a weight problem. Drinking in moderation means that I am less likely to become an alcoholic. Exercising in moderation will mean less tiredness, a low risk of injury and better health. If only we had a moderate amount of stress, paperwork, bills to pay and mundane tasks to do. Cautious and careful Christians can, and should be left alone, to create a good soil.

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<sup>1</sup> D Duncan *Meditations through the Year* 2002 p324

<sup>2</sup> N T Wright *Following Jesus* 100A

However there is another side to this. I do not wish to be moderately fed or moderately loved. I do not want to attend a church whose vicar moderately prepares the sermon and I am not particularly keen on preaching to a congregation who are moderately listening. I do not want to eat food cooked by a moderately skilled chef, nor to be in a moderate marriage with a wife and children who have moderate characters and personalities, nor do I friends who have a moderate commitment to our friendship. I do not want to be a moderate teacher whose students do moderately well. And I do not particularly want to hear, when my time is up, Jesus saying, “moderately well done, Peter, my moderately good and moderately faithful servant.”

I am reminded of John writing in Revelation around 95AD. Worship was to the God, Caesar and persecuted Christians were literally living through Hell on earth. They needed a hope to cling on to. In Laodicea, one of the seven churches, John writes that things are not as they should be: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! Because you are lukewarm.....I will spew you out of my mouth.” Tepid things tend to have a nauseating effect. Try lukewarm soup, tea or beer for example! Laodicea’s water supply came from hot springs miles outside the city. Water flowed across the plateaux and waterfalls, becoming contaminated and losing its heat. John uses this similarity in describing a rich trading city, where the Church was lukewarm in its faith and Christian works, leaving Jesus detached - a model of moderation, not divided particularly, or sinful or heretical but half-hearted at a time when its people needed something more faithful to live by.

Focus on overflowing and glorifying may not, then, be overplaying our quest for rocks in our jar and answers to the quality of our soil. Is God on the doorstep of your heart and knocking at the door of your heart? Is he calling, at this moment, through an almost closed door? Has something got its foot behind the door of your heart? Each time I read these searching questions from a Methodist minister’s sermon I came across a long time ago, I stop in my tracks. They do help me think seriously about my faith and the sort of soil I can really offer God’s seed. Am I too cautious, too anxious, too comfortable, too embarrassed, too unaware, too pre-occupied, too busy? Are you? Jesus has to get through many layers to reach the real you and me. Yet he wants to fling the door off its hinges and move us forward in a giant footstep of faith. We believe that the Holy Spirit is a God given power which allows us to do things we would never have dreamed of doing; things we never knew we could, however old, inexperienced, unhealthy, unskilled, unqualified and lacking in confidence we are or feel we are.

Have you ever contemplated what sort of soil you are in Jesus’ garden and your priorities in this context? Jesus constantly reminded his disciples that no external qualifications, great deeds, no sound knowledge of the Bible or love for one style of liturgy can ever set us right with God. Only friendship with Jesus can do this. We become useless, according to William Barclay, when we do not listen to Jesus, when we pay him unsupported lip service or when we accept what he has to teach us only to shy away when we want to do as we like or when difficulties arise.

Isaiah says: “like flowers or grass or leaves in the wind itself and the fleeting shadow we have a short passage in this world as we do not know where we will be tomorrow.” James, in his Epistle, likens us to puffs of smoke that appear for a moment and then disappear. Our time is in God’s hands not our own and we control how best we use it. How productive a soil can we be in the very short time we have? This should give us courage to overflow with the confidence that we can bring glory to God. It is a good start to answering: what sort of soil am I?

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