

Views from the Pews - The Parable of the Sower

The Sower is one of Jesus' best-known parables, in part because it was an easily memorable story based on the common experience of the country people who first heard it. Broadcasting seeds by hand is still done in places inaccessible to heavy machinery. Even now, vivid images of seedlings choked by weeds or dried up on stony ground can still spring to life for any gardener.

The parable is especially well remembered because all three synoptic gospels recount it (Matt 13:1-9; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8), and because, in all three accounts, Jesus later responds to the disciples' questions by offering a detailed explanation of its hidden meanings to them separately. Why? First, Jesus did not say from the start what his story about a simple agricultural practice had to do with understanding his teaching about the kingdom of God. Furthermore, he ended the parable with the puzzling comment 'Let anyone with ears listen!' followed in v. 13 by a quotation from Isaiah, predicting that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand".

Who do we assume is the Sower? The usual answer is that he is Jesus, broadcasting the words of his teaching in places that don't have it. But in *The Parables of Judgement*, Robert Farar Capon points out that the primary meaning of The Word in the New Testament refers to Jesus himself, the Word of God. So that implies that the Sower is God the Father, and Jesus himself is the seed that is sown. Few people, then or now, can grasp this counterintuitive idea, which perhaps explains Jesus' apparently irrelevant quotation from Isaiah.

Think about the implications. We believe that Jesus as the second Person of the Trinity has been present throughout creation since "before all worlds". There is nowhere in space or time that he, the Word of God, had previously been absent. So we should not visualise the Sower casting the Word of God on to bare ground that never had it before. The early missionaries thought of themselves as bringing Jesus to the heathen, but under this interpretation, Jesus was with them already. Likewise, when we think we are preaching to the unconverted, we might find they already know of him, under another name. The four kinds of ground described in the parable are comprehensive "standins for the great, grey-green, greasy sum of humanity with which God insists on doing business", says Capon.

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