

Is 55:10-11 Ps64:10-14, Rm 8:18-23 Mt 13:1-23

The parable of the Sower, with its final image of an exaggerated bountiful harvest prompts me to recall the exuberant joy and the profound sense of gratitude that I witnessed last year during the Harvest Thanksgiving service of my local Presbyterian Church. The hymn “We plough the fields and scatter” based on the words of the German poet Matthias Claudius was sung with energy and feeling. The rural farming worshippers certainly conveyed a genuine awareness of their dependence on God's generous gifts for their livelihood and well-being. Their service conveyed powerfully the sense of joy, hope and gratitude to God, which is present in these readings.

Isaiah boldly asserts the efficiency of God's word - it will achieve God's purpose in the world. The Psalm shows God enabling the earth to provide a fruitful harvest which ensures that “rejoicing clothes the hills”. Paul writing to the Romans raises the farming imagery of growth, to the level of all creation - waiting to be born into something new.

The richness of the parable is that it speaks to us simultaneously on several levels. The farmer scatters the seed widely, knowing that much will be lost, but ensuring that all types of soil get the opportunity to encounter the seed - the word. The effectiveness of the seed is dependent upon the quality of the soil - the harvest is not automatic. Although three of the four types of soil produce nothing, the sheer abundance from the good soil more than compensates for the loss.

This parable can provide a very useful message of reassurance to every one of us in pastoral ministry who has wondered why there is such a broad spectrum of levels of commitment to the faith within our parishes. We would like to think that we scatter the word widely, enabling all to respond. We can see how the weeds, the distractions, the alternatives, choke and side track many that we would expect to be growing, deepening their roots and providing a harvest. We can at times experience concern about larger social forces working against our mission as a church to spread the word, and wonder about the overall effectiveness of our efforts.

Jesus, like all preachers, would have been conscious that he was speaking firstly to himself. This parable can thus be seen as his way of understanding the resistance, rejection and misunderstanding that he experienced in his ministry. It becomes for him and for us, a message of confidence in what he was doing. If the farmer sows the seed widely and has trust and patience, God will provide the harvest.

The Parable also invites each of us to look inwardly and to recognise those times and areas of our lives where we are, or have been, the non-productive soil. It asks us to have the humility to accept our own responsibilities to prepare good soil in our hearts for the word of God. Out of that humility we may gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of levels of openness to the faith among our parishioners. That understanding can help renew our enthusiasm, and strengthen our belief in the ultimate success of our mission.