July 12th

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.  But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.  Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.  Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:  When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.  But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matt 13).

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55)

Today’s gospel reading is one of the most well known of Jesus’ parables - the sower. Familiar now, and familiar then, as Jesus used an agricultural scene which many would have seen or even been part of. And yet - not *quite* so: a good farmer would carefully choose and prepare the ground - not go wastefully flinging precious seeds all over the place. But perhaps this is one of the points Jesus is making. This farmer is providing: ‘a generous lashing of opportunity as seed and soil are given the chance to produce a harvest. This is risk taken in order to offer the chance for life without the absolute guarantee of success.’ (Rosalind Brown).

The farmer is God, sowing the seed of his word in the world. But as is made clear in verses 10 to 17 (which the Lectionary omits from today’s reading) the disciples are called to join in the work, as are we. Part of that work is to prepare the soil, removing rocks and weeds to give the seedlings a better chance. But another aspect of our discipleship is not to get in the way of God’s generosity. Jane Williams writes: ‘We long to take over from God… We would not be the sower who flings the seed about without looking where it is going to land. We would make sure that the seed got only to people like us, that we know can be trusted with it.’

In this benefice we have been in a period of transition since last autumn. And what we were doing in the interim has been affected by the Covid19 restrictions. A good time then, to take stock and consider what we might want or need to do as restrictions are gradually lifted. How can we prepare new ground so that more seeds can flourish? Considering the parables of Jesus, Tom Wright says: ‘Christianity isn’t about cosy little lessons to make us feel better. It’s about what God’s doing in the world … and what he wants to do through us… what sort of stories ought we to be telling to get people to listen? Where can we tell them so that people will be able to hear?’

To a degree, some ground may have already been prepared. As we have joined in the public response to Covid19 we have connected with people in more, and different ways. It will be wonderful to build on those beginnings, and through those relationships to discover more of what people need, what they can offer, and how all of this can bring our communities into a closer walk with God. This is not to say that we ignore our existing church families - whilst cultivating new ground the farmer does not neglect the growing crops - all the harvest will be needed. But we are also called to venture onto new ground, take the risks, and trust that God knows both the plan and the outcome: ‘my word … will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.’

So now we begin the first tentative steps towards the future, that as yet unchartered land of the post-covid19 church. And we prepare to welcome Andrew, and to work with him to discover God’s plans for the next stage of our journey. In the meantime, Jane Williams suggests: ‘What must we wishful sowers do? Prepare the ground as much as we can, but then trust in the generous mercy of God, and sometimes throw caution to the wind, and watch with delight as God’s word accomplishes what we could never have dreamed of.’