

Holy Waste

So, Jesus, the carpenter, gets into a boat, and proceeds to tell the crowd a story about farming. And I'm not sure that the farmers in the crowd would have been too impressed by this story: they might well have concluded that this carpenter didn't know what he was talking about.

I mean, Jesus describes a sower who steps out and proceeds to throw seed around everywhere – along paths, among rocks and into clumps of thistles. Excuse me, but before you chuck seed about, don't you first prepare the soil? Aren't you supposed to clear the rocks, pull out the thistles and plough it up, drilling furrows for the seed to fall into? But no, this guy seems to be in a world of his own, just throwing it about here, there and everywhere. Let the wind carry it where it will! So is it a surprise that so much seed goes to waste? You can't blame the birds in the air from flapping down and devouring what they can – look at the pigeons in Dam Square! And if you will sow seed in rocks don't expect a harvest, and did you know that there is a verse in Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 3 which says, 'Break up your ground that lies unploughed, do not sow among thorns'. Of course you did. And even if Jesus knew nothing about farming, I thought he was supposed to know his Bible.

But of course, what Jesus is on about here is not really farming. This is a parable, a story with a depth of meaning. At one level it is about the proclaiming of God's Word and the variety of responses that will produce. The world is not well attuned to the Word of God and some people will ignore it altogether; and some will make a joyous and instant response that has no depth and will not last; and some will respond, but will soon be overcome by the cares and temptations of the world. And just occasionally – sometimes – God's Word will produce lasting and abundant fruit – and that makes it all worthwhile.

Well, taking all that as read, I want to explore another side to this story, another image that lies at its heart, and that is the image of waste. So many seeds in this story are wasted as they are thrown around, so many end up unproductive, and I would suggest Jesus' use of this image fits neatly with one of God's specialities: holy, gratuitous waste.

Come outside for a moment, at least in your imagination, and look up at the dark night sky. What do you see? Well, if the night is you see stars, lots of them. Actually, there are an awful lot of them, far, far more than we can see or number. I hesitate to estimate how many stars there are in the universe, but I did look it up on the internet and it came upon a number that had 21 zeroes. I don't know what a number with 21 zeroes is called – are we dealing here with gazillions? – but it doesn't really matter as I suspect that this is a huge underestimate anyway. Then of course there may be, or so I'm told, more than one universe. We are, apparently, in the realm of the multiverse with universes proliferating like bubbles in soap suds. So add gazillions more zeroes onto the 21 that are registered for this universe if you want a grand total and suddenly our little minds begin to wilt like those seeds. And how many of these stars in all these universes support life? Pass. No-one knows. But what is very clear is that you need an awful lot of stars before you find one that sustains life. So what, in the great scheme of God's plan, is the point of all the others? What are they there for?

Well, in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, God reached deep into the divine star-sack and flung them into space – billions upon billions of stars and planets. And don't expect me to do the maths but some planets – a huge percentage – fell along the cosmological footpath and remained inert and dead, and others fell on cosmological stony ground where the conditions were right and perhaps life flickered briefly – just a few million years – but then died; and on just a few – who knows, maybe even just one – life evolved. Then our divine star-sower rejoiced and laughed, for here at last was a partner, someone to love and be loved by. But what about all the rest? What a glorious, holy waste! Galaxies of excess stars and lifeless planets! But God just loves throwing around cosmic seeds and waiting for one, somewhere, to germinate, and God delights in them all, productive or not.

Or think of the whole process in terms of time. How many years since the Big Bang, assuming there was a Big Bang? 13.7 billion is the estimate – again, a lot of zeroes. And how long did it take for the first origins of life to emerge? 9 billion years maybe. And how long before human

beings showed up? About 200,000 years ago. So, if the entire life of the universe was condensed into a single day, 24 hours, then human life emerged about one and a quarter seconds ago. About the time it takes to click your fingers. What took us so long? What a gigantic waste of time! All those unproductive years! What was God doing all that time, just waiting for something to happen? Years, however, are like stars. God scatters them like seed, and isn't bothered if very few are fruitful.

Or indeed, speaking of seeds - and if I might get a little biological here - how many sperm does it take to fertilize one egg? Don't even go there - once again we're in the land of the multiple zeroes. And just remember this: if you're here today, then you're a winner. If you're here today, it's because you beat a lot of other contenders to that egg. Congratulations! But again, what a waste of all the others! So much is unfruitful. But then on the other hand, just take a look in the mirror and see what one seed can do!

You see, it seems that when God is at work efficiency and productivity don't really figure. God just wastes, and maybe that's because when we are dealing with creation we are not dealing with the economy of big business and the corporate world where efficiency and productivity and profit rule everything. No, we are dealing with the economy of grace - God's generous, patient, stubborn, foolish, excessive grace. And where there is grace, different rules apply. There much is scattered and much is wasted but some, somehow, somewhere will be fruitful and there will be much rejoicing.

Of course, not all waste is holy. In a world of grinding poverty and gross inequality and terrible drought and famine there is sinful waste. What we throw away, what we scrape from our dishes and discard, what we waste with our insane use of energy and resources is a whole different story. That's unholy waste. But it's precisely the kind of unrestrained, un-calculating, open-handed scattering from those who have to those who have not that would put an end to world poverty and put a smile on God's face.

So take this story as a story of love and grace and generosity. Throw seeds of kindness, and seeds of justice and peace, and seeds of patience and forgiveness, and ransom seeds of blessing, throw them all around, all the seeds of the harvest of God's Spirit. Throw them generously and excessively - and don't calculate and account and worry too much about response. You will meet all the reactions pictured in this parable: stubborn rejection, half-hearted acceptance, disappointment: that was the story of Jesus' ministry. But it didn't deter him one bit. He just rejoiced with the angels in heaven over every seed that sprouted and flowered.

A wonderful preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, has a beautiful sermon on this passage which ends with her own retelling of the story. On the understanding that imitation is the best form of flattery I am going to risk my own retelling, drawing hugely on hers. The result is not a patch on hers, but it goes like this...

'Once upon a time a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came along and devoured them. So he put down his seed-sack and went home and collected a pile of old clothes and he went to his shed and with some old wood he knocked up a scarecrow and stuck it in the field. 'That'll keep them away', he thought.' So he carried on sowing. But then he noticed the rocks - everywhere, jeering at him. 'Darn!' he thought. I should have cleared those rocks!' So he fetched his wheel-barrow and began to clear them, stopping only to stretch and to ease his aching back.

On he went with his sowing. But it was then that he saw the thistles - there, and there and there - and he thought to himself, 'Darn, darn! I should have rotivated and ploughed this field first'. But not wanting to disturb the seeds he had already sown he just put on a thick pair of gardening gloves and proceeded to pull up all the thistles he could see.

And by then it was evening and so he went home a slept a sound sleep.

When he awoke, back he went to the field and this is what he saw. Birds were sitting on his scarecrow, eyeing him defiantly and others were strutting around his field, fearless, pecking away. And as he looked down he saw more and more rocks and stones: they seemed to have bred overnight, and then his heart sank as he saw that already the thistles he'd pulled up were re-appearing, poking up through the ground.

So then he began to do something very strange. He began to laugh. First a quiet chuckle, then louder, and eventually a full, wheezy guffaw. And what he did next was crazy. He reached deep into his sack and pulled out a handful of seed and threw it in a great arc. And the birds rose from the scarecrow and flapped down in a flurry and then he did it again, throwing the seed everywhere – on the ground, in the long grass at the edge of the field. He threw some at his cows, at his dog, even ran over and threw some in the river that flowed by his field. Who knows where they might end up? On and on he went, chuckling, wheezing, laughing out loud. Anyone who saw him thought he'd gone mad, but he'd never felt such joy in his life.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear. Amen.

Holy and loving God,
 Lord of the starfields,
 Sower of life, sower of love, scatterer of light,
 we worship praise and bless you.
 All around us we see your generous handiwork,
 Wherever we turn we see
 new life breaking through old well-trod paths,
 fresh shoots cracking concrete and growing,
 buds springing from old wintry stems,
 for in you God is fullness of life that will not be thwarted.
 O God whose love seeds your world
 all glory and honour be yours.

O God forgive us when we are wintry, lifeless and unfruitful.
 Forgive us when your love falls on hard and stony hearts,
 or when it is smothered by the cares and pre-occupations of the world.
 Forgive us for missed opportunities,
 for grace allowed to lie dormant.
 O God have mercy upon us as we confess our sins and failures...

Loving God,
 the arc of your love extends far beyond
 our failure and disgrace.
 The depth of your love forgiveness
 far out-measures the shallowness of our lives.
 Take our hard and stony hearts,
 Soften them by your Spirit
 And make our lives responsive and fruitful.
 We pray in the name of Jesus in whose words we pray saying...

For the fruits of all creation thanks be to God...

O loving God we pray today for those places where there are no fruits of creation, and there is no ploughing, or sowing, or reaping and no growth because of the climate, or because of war, or because of structural poverty. O God we pray especially for Yemen, that catastrophic famine might be avoided there. And we pray for refugee camps there and elsewhere holding people fleeing from conflicts and natural disasters.

O God bless those who are striving to deal with this great tide of need, those with the task of caring for the hungry and despairing. Bless doctors and nurses and nutritionists and all the agencies seeking to cope with the corona crisis. Unite us, we pray, as one world in striving for life for all

And we pray for a world where many starve while others waste and throw food away. We pray for the dismantling of unjust structures that keep people in poverty and that expand the gap between rich and poor. We pray for a world where your gifts to every nation are traded fairly and all receive the just reward of their labour.

And God we pray for earth's safe-keeping, that we might do all that we can to combat the climate change that disturbs weather patterns and wreaks havoc on the already poorest and weakest.

In the just reward of labour God's will is done...

And God we pray for the harvest of the Spirit in the witness of your church. Grant that we may proclaim faithfully in word and in deed the conviction that Jesus is Lord.

O God, make us open-hearted and generous to others. Help us to sow seeds of love, peace and reconciliation. Help us in our dealings with one another to reflect the one whose wasteful love surrounds us, whose wonders astound us, whose truths confound us, and, above all, whose love has found us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.