

Last year I inherited a pile of Records – LP's. When they arrived and I initially thought I would give them all to charity, but when as I looked at the three boxes full I decided that it would be a chance for me to learn a little more about my cousin if I took the time to listen to at least some of them. For the last twelve months I have been working my way through, though often I return to some favourite treasures I found. One is an original cast recording of Godspell. The quality on the record is so different from that of CD or even of film recording I have seen of the play. There are a number of songs I find very powerful from that production but and one is All good gifts!

*We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand
He sends us snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain
The breezes and the sunshine and soft refreshing rain*

*All good gifts around us, are sent from Heaven above
So thank the Lord, oh, thank the Lord for all His love¹*

Whenever I listen to this song I am reminded of two of the passages we have heard this afternoon. The amazing poetry from Isaiah 55 and then the parable of the sower from Matthew's Gospel.

Both these readings capture the joy and hope which we see in God. An abundance which is I suspect always difficult for us to understand.

This morning too, as we had our first communion service at Christ Church in four months, I found that at some moments I felt overwhelmed by the generosity of God. That with all that is going on around us, in all the uncertainty, in all the new ways we have found to worship – God's abundant love has never been in question. All Good gifts around us!

Our reading from Isaiah comes towards the end of Second of Isaiah. It started in Chapter 40 with the word comfort and through the following fifteen chapters the prophet creates a vivid, expansive vision of what comfort will mean for the exiles of Judah and assures them that it is coming soon. Restoration and renewal are germinating just under the surface of the earth². It is a promise that is resonated to the Israelites, and it is one that is continue in the New Testament as well. God is a God of renewal and hope – if only we have the courage to embrace that promise.

The image which is so strong in this passage from Isaiah is the overabundance of God's love, God's promise especially for those who have endured hardship. It is not to make light of pain or grief, but rather to acknowledge the generous love of God in holding us and nurturing us.

¹ <https://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/godspell/allgoodgifts.htm>

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3343

The image of God's abundance in the face of creation seems almost wasteful when we turn to the parable of the sower. The sower seems not to care where the seed is thrown, otherwise it would only fall on good soil! The parable is told to a community who understood the importance of seeds, and how valuable they were, so in many ways this is irresponsible. But the gift of a parable is that it is a story, it is trying to help us understand something else! In the explanation which is given to the disciples, Jesus tells them they need to listen – they need to be open to hearing and seeing things in new ways if they want to understand God's purpose.

We come to understand that the seed and soil represent those who hear and understand the word. When the seed and the soil are good, their hearts, the center of their very being, embrace the good news. They fight off evil. They endure difficulties. They are not defined by worldly cares and wealth. They join the community formed by and committed to God's kingdom. (12:46).

Seed was not cheap in the ancient world, and everyone who listened to Jesus' parable would have recognized the sheer wastefulness, even stupidity, of such an approach to farming. Yet when we get to Jesus' interpretation, the generosity/wastefulness of the sower and the amazing abundance of seed isn't even mentioned. Instead, the focus has shifted entirely to the soil, drawing an analogy between the different qualities of soil and different kinds of believers³. The implication seems to be that our role as disciples is to be 'good soil'.

So what does being 'good soil' mean for how we live, how we are church, how we respond to God's generous love?

A gardener will tell you that good soil takes years to cultivate. It must be fed, nurtured by the remains of plants that have come and gone. It must be worked and reworked so that it becomes supple, but not worked so hard that its structure is broken down. And it must be replenished, as seeds grow and draw on its nutrients.⁴.

This is true for us too – we do not just become good soil – it takes a life time of work – like soil needs care, so does our faith. This of course come from prayer, reflection and study of the bible, but also in our worship together, worship over many years in this place – which is why returning to church is important to so many, it is part of what shapes our soil – that is our faith! But we do need to take care – not to take the gardener analogy too far, we need to ensure we do not become too root bound! In some ways, the last 4 months have also been a gift, in that they have helped us learn how to nurture our faith when we need to step outside the familiar. It may not have been comfortable or even our preference, but we have had to learn how to keep learning and growing.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-6-a-enough/>

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4510

I think there are a number of things which we can take from these two readings. Firstly God's love is abundant, like the dew and the new rains, like seeds scattered irresponsibly, God has more to offer that we can imagine and we must never fear that God does not have enough love for us. We all that we face in these times we should be reassured of God's love for us. All good gifts around us.

Secondly, if we embrace God's love as we have, if we strive to be part of God's kingdom, we need to allow ourselves to be nurtured and held. We need to be open to learning and growing, we need to allow ourselves to mature in faith overtime. We need to be open to the fact that like good soil we will develop and change over time.

Finally, we need to be willing to flourish. The good seed on good soil grew 100 fold – it is a great abundance, but it can also be scary to grow that much, to develop that much, to change that much. We need to be open to allowing God to shape us.

Our faith may feel strange at time but we are reminded that God wants us to flourish – may we have the courage to allow God to help us! Amen