



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

How confident or otherwise do you feel about sharing your faith with other people? Why do you think that is?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You're encouraged to take some time to bring your own thanks and praises to God. The following response may be used:

Life-giving and all-loving creator God,
receive our thanks and praises. Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 65:1 – 8

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion;

and to you shall vows be performed,
O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.
When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,
you forgive our transgressions.

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;

you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.

By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds
are awed by your signs;

you make the gateways of the morning and the evening
shout for joy.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
We bring to you those things in our own lives
and within the life of the world we share
in need of transformation and fresh hope:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:

God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:

God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:

God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:

God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of love and life,

you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.

Set us free us to follow you, and grant us that peace
which passes all our understanding. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 13:1 – 9, 18 – 23

Sermon

My knowledge of gardening is, by my own admission, rather limited. I do not know what the vast majority of plants are called, or what the best conditions for growing them in are, or whether they are annuals or perennials. So, in an attempt to improve that situation, during the past months, I've taken to occasionally watching *Gardeners' World*. In one episode, Monty Don was planting some flower seeds, and in the process was taking great care to keep them several centimetres apart from one another, I presume so that each could have sufficient space to grow. He made a small hole in the soil for each, added an extra helping of compost and watered them. It was a very thoughtful

process, it seemed to me, unlike the strategy of the sower in today's parable. Even I know enough about gardening to know that wasting so much seed by indiscriminately scattering them on paths and onto rocky ground and amongst thorns is not a good strategy! Yet, Jesus talks about that seed which *does* take root yielding huge quantities, well beyond what could be achieved in reality even with modern day intensive farming techniques! So, what's going on here?

In his commentary on today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Tom Wright remembers visiting Lake Galilee and standing by an inlet not unlike the one that a large crowd had once gathered around to listen to Jesus. Apparently, there are many such areas on the edge of the lake just to the west of Capernaum. That day, the group's tour guide rowed out to the middle of this inlet, in a borrowed fishing boat, and addressed them, taking advantage of the excellent acoustics just as Jesus had two thousand years previously. For Wright, the spectacle really brought today's passage to life. Elsewhere in the Gospels, we are told Jesus was often followed by crowds who pressed in closely, in the hope of getting to speak with him, or touch him. Anybody who has ever experienced being surrounded by crowds eagerly wanting a word with us, and treating our bodies as public property, may well appreciate his need for some breathing space!

When he began to teach, Jesus told what he himself later called the Parable of the Sower, and he concluded by saying, 'If you have got ears, then listen!', which translates to, 'You're going to need to think about this; I'm not going to make it too obvious!'. Jesus engaged his audiences with stories designed to make them do their share of the work, rather than simply spoon-feeding them the 'right answers'. His parables often defy easy explanation, and most have several layers to them. They require thinking through and chewing over with others to make sense of them, and maybe even changing our minds, as a result of what we find out in the process. Expectations were running high that Jesus had come to set Israel free from Roman oppression.

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had also used imagery of seeds, and sowing, to speak the words of God in earlier times of trouble for Israel. In that heightened atmosphere, with many longing for violent rebellion, I imagine some in the crowd believing that Jesus was their longed-for 'Military Messiah'. However, this parable pointed instead to a need to let go of prior expectations and to hear what Jesus was saying in his own terms, having grappled with its true meaning.

So, what was Jesus getting at within his Parable of the Sower? Well, as readers, we have the advantage of hearing the explanation given to the disciples later on, in a less public setting. The seed is the key message Jesus came to bring – the kingdom of God has come near in his very person. God's new hope is shared freely and abundantly, as this seed is extravagantly scattered around. However, some who hear just don't understand; this is like seed landing on the hardened ground of the pathways. Some who hear respond initially with great joy, but deep roots aren't easily put down amidst rocky ground, and at the first sign of commitment becoming costly, they turn away. Yet others *do* hear and understand, but other priorities, the cares of the world and the power of wealth, act like thorns and weeds that starve them of sustenance, and choke off their faith. However, some of the scattered seed *does* take root, as people both hear and understand what Jesus is about, putting down deep roots and yielding a harvest of lives transformed by the love of God.

So, I think Jesus was issuing an invitation to those crowds gathered by the Sea of Galilee to leave behind their prior expectations of him, and follow him in seeking the Kingdom of God, which is about hope, new beginnings, and the love of God manifest in the ways our world actually works. We know his own disciples would find that hard; they ran away like seed sown on rocky ground, when matters came to a head as Jesus was arrested. The rich young ruler was like the seed sown amongst thorns and weeds: close to the Kingdom of God, and yet unable to make God his top priority when he was told this meant

laying aside his wealth (Matthew 19:16 – 22). And we know that lots of people simply didn't understand Jesus, and rejected him because of that, like seed landing on the hard ground of the pathways. Thus, we might be tempted to read this as being about striving to be 'good soil' into which God can plant seed that develops deep roots and so yields much fruit, but I think this misses the point slightly.

You see, Jesus doesn't say that our role is to change *ourselves* into good soil when we realise that we each have something of the other three types of ground in our hearts. We cannot redeem or transform ourselves. What we can do is to recognise how God-in-Christ never gives up on us even, when the ground of our hearts is hard or rocky, or full of thorns and weeds. The seeds of God's Love continue to be scattered extravagantly, and it is the same Holy Spirit present when God spoke the word of creation who tends that ground, breaking up the hardened soil, digging out the rocks and weeding out the thorns. Experiencing that is not always easy, and requires openness to this often-painful process on our part. Yet, God patiently brings new life, and plants seeds that yield much fruit, more often than not by calling flawed human beings, like you and me. To be a disciple is to be one who scatters the seed of God's love, through what we say and what we do. We are called to share, and to be, good news for all. Sharing and being good news means serving others, working toward justice, and sharing our stories of faith. The latter means evangelism.

Sadly, evangelism is sometimes seen as a dirty word in parts of the Church, perhaps because it is often associated with a version of the Christian faith that seems to have little to do with love. However, the core of what evangelism is about is, simply, sharing stories that like the parables of Jesus – stories that make people pause and ponder, wrestle and wonder, and perhaps even change their minds. There's lots to say about how we do this appropriately and ethically, keeping in mind that we have two ears and one mouth in that ratio for a good reason! As the Parable of the Sower reminds us, not all of the seeds

we sow will yield fruit. Yet, we are called to be and to share the good news of God's love, not because we're worried about bums on seats in church services, but because we've given a gift of love and grace and hope, which multiplies thirty or sixty or even hundred-fold in the giving away. May we be people who truly are good news, scattering seeds of love and life. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Paula Gooder's 2020 book *The Parables* explores the reason Jesus used parables and offers her take on each one in the Gospels.

Prayers of Intercession

God of love and hope and life,
we bring our prayers for transformation before you.
Sower of new life, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the breaking up of the ground
when our hearts have become hardened,
and your words of love and life bounce off us.
We lay before you the times when we have
failed to see the humanity of others and been prejudiced,
assumed the worst of those who are different to us,
been quick to judge and slow to listen,
and have turned a blind eye to injustice and suffering.
God of love and hope and life,
break up the hard ground of our hearts,
so that seeds of new life might grow and flourish.
Sower of new life, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the clearing out of the ground
when our hearts have become rocky,
and our commitment to you has diminished.
We lay before you the times when we have

placed self-interest before the needs of the vulnerable,
shied away from speaking words of truth and hope,
walked by on the other side when stopping means sacrifice,
and have missed opportunities to share and be good news.
God of love and hope and life,
clear out the rocky ground of our hearts,
so that seeds of new life might grow and flourish.
Sower of new life, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the weeding of the ground
when our hearts have been taken over by thorns and weeds,
and the cares of world and wealth have choked off our faith.
We lay before you the times when we have
valued affluence and its trappings more than you,
treated you like a consumer product to be used & discarded,
cared more about status and power than kindness and care,
and become indistinguishable from just another social club.
God of love and hope and life,
weed out the thorns and weeds growing in our hearts,
so that seeds of new life might grow and flourish.
Sower of new life, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of quiet, we bring our prayers for others to you...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing