**Matthew 13.3: “A sower went out to sow.”**

Grosvenor Chapel, Fifth Sunday after Trinity
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Last week, when the Treasury reviewed the likely economic impact of the pandemic, when cities and states throughout the world re-entered into lockdown, when the parlous state of care and social services were brutally exposed, where the long term health and prospects of the rising generation were called into question, and when my dear daughter Eleanor found she’d lost her first job, I switched on the radio and heard something that made me smile. I’d mistuned to Radio 2, a channel I don’t often listen to, but because they were playing soundtracks from old musicals, and because we are led to believe we’ll never hear these live performed again, I thought I’d hang around. I’d love for our own choir to be able to do the job they do so well and sing words that you’d prefer I myself wouldn’t sing, but here are words I heard said, from the musical *Purlie*, a Broadway hit in 1970.

*D’ye ever get the feel’n when you read th’ papers the world is caving in*

*An’ that the animal part of the human heart is finally gonna win*

*Well it just may be that what you see are the growing pains of liberty*

*An’ the world ain’t coming to an end my friend*

*The world’s just coming to a start!*

*Pulie* turns out to be about a travelling preacher trying to save a community church. I smiled ruefully when I reflected how much the church seems far more interested in the world just coming to an end. The start that *Purlie* wants to make is reviving a racially segregated community in the 1950s Deep South of America. And the book that it’s based on is by Ossie Davis, well known as a black rights activist. I knew none of this when listening to the hit. Its topicality seemed just as fresh now as it must have been then, and hit me square in the eye:

*A commentator makes a grim prediction the world ain’t gonna work*

*An’ tha’ the orderly line in the human mind has really gone beserk*

*When it just may be that what we see are the dying throes of apathy*

*An’ the world ain’t coming to an end my friend*

*The world’s just coming to a start!*

Read in this context, the parable of the sower is about the same message. Jesus is not so much proclaiming the end of the world as declaring the coming of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is a new creation and to enter the kingdom is to make a fresh start. The parable is about how a listener enters this kingdom, or, perhaps more accurately, how the kingdom enters into the life of the listener. That it is therefore about growth and new beginnings makes for a cheerful message, but it is far, far more than that, and we should not let our appetite for good news stories at a time like this blind us to the fundamental truth of what Jesus is saying. It is literally a matter of life and death whether we get this message. If you don’t get this message, Jesus is saying, is not that you’ve missed out on a good story. You have missed out on an opening, an offer and an employment opportunity that may never come your way again.

I put it like that because so many people are thinking at this time about jobs and livelihood and work. New opportunities are scarce and existing employments are threatened. The force of the parable of the sower lies partly in the way it addresses many people’s natural concern about how their energies will be spent if they are not to go to seed or fall by the wayside. This is deep stuff, and its deepness goes all the way back to how, in God’s work of creation, we creatures are made to work. As one modern theologian puts it[[1]](#footnote-1), the intimacy – the inwardness of God to all things – and the transcendence of God – His total otherness – have the same source in divine creative activity, so that the closer our work gets to God, the deeper and deeper it gets to ourselves as God’s creatures. What better image than the sower and the seed in his hand to convey how intimately God deals with us to do His great work.

But you don’t have to be a theologian to think about where God’s hand is in the daily work you do as God calls us into His service. Even if you feel secure in the use of your time or your talents, you may appreciate the opportunity to review your employment in the Lord’s service, just to make sure you’re on the right track.

Firstly, it pays to know whether we are fully committed to the employment being offered us. My colleagues in HR tell me that the bane of every recruiter is the shortlisted candidate juggling multiple job offers who closes with a rival employer. When explaining about *The seeds that fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up*, Jesus warns us that confusion about our priorities can be a risky, even devilish business: *when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches it away.* Kingdom work is not some form of moonlighting. Many a self-supporting Christian minister will have a contract which stipulates that, unless otherwise agreed, their paid work must be their primary or even exclusive employment. For me and perhaps also for you, there is the risk that Jesus warns us elsewhere of, that if our energies are spent across a multiplicity of competing commitments we may come to love the one and hate the other. The kingdom can only work if such energies are properly integrated and our priorities and commitments cohere, and the quality of Christian discipleship is that it demonstrates such coherence.

Second, it pays to think about probation. This is the clause in your contract you may be inclined to overlook in your exhilaration of getting the job, where the employer can “let you go” after a period of time. It’s there to ensure your basic grasp of the job; your commitment when things get difficult; and your potential to lay down roots. When mentioning *The seeds that fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil*, Jesus refers to those who fail their probation*.*  *Such a person has no root, but endures only for a while; when trouble or persecution arises, that person immediately falls away.* Kingdom work does not, therefore, simply involve commitment: it requires re-commitment when, in times of hardship, the love that first committed us to this service is, by God’s grace, remembered, renewed and rediscovered.

Thirdly, it pays to think whether you might actually be overqualified for this job. If you think the Christian life is about respectability, erudition, and status, you may be busy getting those qualifications, polishing up your CV, saving for a deposit and expanding your linked-in contacts to the extent that this, more than anything else, characterises your whole approach. You are not actually committing to anything if you make achievement of these goals the condition of your Christian commitment. When talking of *The seeds that fell among thorns which grew up and choked them*, Jesus has in mind type of person well qualified in their own eyes to undertake anything they endeavour to do but for whom *the cares of the world and the lure of wealth have choked the word.* Of course there are certain qualities you associate with kingdom work, and certain things you’re expected to know, but the whole point of Christian discipleship is that you learn them on the job, and that commitment comes before qualification.

In present circumstances, there is a tight-rope to be walked in preaching this parable. Taken too literally and it sounds like tips for enhancing your prospects of profitable employment: “bringing forth grain up to a hundredfold”. Taken too spiritually and it’s cold comfort for those who are struggling to make a living. “What does it profit if a brother or sister lacks daily food”, asked the writer of the Letter of James, “and you simply say, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled.’?” Should the church just shut up at a time like this, lest either it offend or offer false hope?

For a society challenged to think about livelihood, the relevance of Jesus’ words has never been greater. Even more about than about how we are paid, these words are about how we are employed. They therefore affect most parts of our life, corporate and individual, thoughts, feelings and practical actions. It is fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and of our society that we know ourselves to be employed in a divine economy – God’s economy – an economy whose workings are illustrated in this parable of the sower. Bringing forth grain is fundamentally God’s business, but the profitability of the business is down to those employed in it. The yield on the seed serves both as a measure of God’s success and of our own. In what is thus a joint venture, therefore, God’s creative energy informs what we make of our lives, and our fulfilment is the sign of the coming of the kingdom. Given how much God has invested in our lives, it is a mark of investor confidence that, as Jesus elsewhere tells his disciples, “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

This is the sentiment which chimed with the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s statement last week, in response to the economic challenges of COVID-19, that “this has never just been a question of economics, but of values”. In affirming “the nobility of work” and “the inspiring power of opportunity”, the political classes seem close to acknowledging that it is a religious duty to ensure we are kept busy not just for busyness’s sake but for our own good and for God’s good pleasure. If our own experience enables us to do so, then it is our opportunity, and arguably our duty, to testify sensitively and constructively to this sense of fulfilment in our lives as Christians, and to the endurance which enables even those among us who are struggling in paid employment to agree that, while things may be difficult, the life God has given us to live is still is worthwhile.

It is not therefore, as we heard from *Purlie*, that the world is coming to an end. And *Purlie* isn’t the only musical that testifies to the irrepressible human conviction that, somehow, The Show Must Go On. But, unlike that final number in *Moulin Rouge*, when “inside my heart is breaking; my makeup may be flaking” and “behind the curtain, in the pantomime” we are driven to ask “Does anybody know, what we are living for?”, we hear God’s assurance that the seed He has planted in us grows; because it is His will and His pleasure that it do so; because such is our purpose, such is our destiny; such is the enterprise that He has undertaken with us and in us and through us. That is our business. That is our life. That is the work that God gives us to do. **Amen.**

1. Denys Turner (after Aquinas) *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)