

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge

Sunday 4th February 2018 – Sexagesima

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Luke 8: 4-15

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

I wonder if there is anywhere else in the world –other than Oxford and Cambridge Colleges – that you can determine someone's social standing by whether they are allowed to walk on the grass? At Trinity College, where I am the Chaplain, only Fellows are allowed to walk on the grass, and as you can imagine, the grass isn't just your run of the mill garden grass with tufts of uneven grass and molehills, but manicured grass which is regularly mown, fed, watered, edged, and even aerated with a special contraption that resembles a giant massage brush. It's no surprise, then, given all of the love and care that is lavished on it, that the grass at Trinity – and at many other Colleges around Cambridge – is pristine: a testament to the hard work of the gardeners but also to the ones who planned the courts and walks many generations ago.

Of course the real reason that the grass at Trinity and other College's prospers is not only the regular deployment of the giant grassy massage brush, but rather that it had the good fortune of being planted in good soil. Good grass grows in good soil: if the soil is weak and lacking in nutrition then it's pretty obvious that good things will struggle to grow there. In our reading today we hear Jesus imparting this piece of horticultural wisdom to his disciples. 'Some [seeds, he says] fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.' While on the surface this advice may sound as though Jesus is auditioning for a bit part on Gardeners World, it soon becomes pretty clear that Jesus is imparting more knowledge here than just good gardening tips.

The reason we know this is that the story is introduced as a parable, a type of story that is used throughout the New Testament to teach us something about the Kingdom of God. So while on the surface it may appear that Jesus is talking about seeds and soil, what he is actually really describing is the way in which his followers must themselves be like the good soil, which is ready to be planted with the word of God. Unusually for a parable of the New Testament, we can be sure what this parable means because Jesus himself tells us!

It will come as no surprise that our call as disciples of Christ is to model ourselves on the good soil, the ones who, 'when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance'. But what does that complicated sentence really look like in real life? Well we, like the good soil that we are to replicate, need two things before we can bring forth fruit: and those two things are nutrition and location. So let's take each one of those in turn:

First, nutrition: Gardeners will know that the key to healthy growth is the provision of the right nutrients. We in our Christian discipleship are no different. We cannot expect to grow in our knowledge of God's love if we are not giving our souls and bodies the right sort of spiritual nutrition. The type of nutrition that we require will vary from person to person: some will nurture their faith through the reading of scripture, while others will enrich their soil with a diet of sacred music or prayer. For me personally I find the Eucharist to be the place where I receive sustenance, for it is the place where we come together as a community, hear the story of salvation proclaimed, encounter God in the bread and wine, and then are sent out back into the world.

Second, location is also important for, just as seeds won't grow if they fall on the path, neither can we expect soil to bring about new life unless it is installed in the right place. Our faith is not something that we do just for us but rather is something that we should be living out and offering to the world. We should therefore be taking the good news out to those around us, rather than just waiting on the side-lines thinking that this faith 'thing' is all about us. If we spread ourselves around our community then we have the opportunity to model how the word of God might be made visible in the world. Put simply, our call is not to be good soil for good soils sake, but rather to be good soil that is offered up to the community so that the whole land may prosper.

At the beginning of this sermon I spoke about the carefully manicured lawns of the Cambridge Colleges. As you leave this Chapel after today's service, take a glance at the grass and take a moment to consider how it nurtured and sustained by the good soil that lies underneath. Notice how you can't see the soil because of the good grass that sprung up out of the sure foundations, and think about what you can do to enrich your own soil so that the word of God might similarly spring forth from you. Amen.