

‘Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!’

So. Sow.

I have just played a trick of language. If you heard ‘So’ as ‘S’ ‘O’ then you might have heard me saying, ‘Here we are then, we’ve arrived at where we’ve arrived and what’s next? So – what?’

Or you might have heard ‘sow’ as a 3-letter word, ‘S’ ‘O’ with a ‘W’ on the end. In terms of this sermon, that’s the ‘sow’ I want you to hear. If you ask what the church is for then the answer is that we throw seed about, that’s ministry, it’s what you and I have to do. But what do we sow? Mark tells us that we sow a secret and the secret is defined as the Kingdom of God. But do you feel enlightened? You are at liberty to ask ‘what’s that?’, this ‘secret of the Kingdom’. Annoyingly, we are not really told, not in plain language that is. But the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas gets it pretty well spot on when he says in his poetry it’s a prospect where ‘the poor man is king and the consumptive is healed, and industry is for mending the bent bones and the minds fractured by life’. The Kingdom is the reverse of what life was like then in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and I suggest what life is like now for many, probably the majority, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But sticking with our riddle – that’s what Mark thought parables were BTW, riddles for you to puzzle over or be shocked by – this riddle concentrates on the difficulties of getting this ‘secret of the Kingdom of God’ received and rooted and made fruitful. Why is everyone not on board with the marvellous promise of the reversal of values? The answer must be that there’s something wrong with the reception equipment in human beings – perhaps the evil one was working extra hard to deceive people; or may be the new Christians were fearful of persecution; or was it plain old wealth which chokes the soul? These are the explanations given in the second half of the riddle. The problem lies with human beings and not the gospel’s message, in spite of its secretive nature. But, you know, I’m wondering after 40 years of ordained ministry, 41 if you count the trainee Deacon year, whether placing the blame on those outside of the church is the most truthful way of being Christian now. I’ve got the message and if you don’t hear it then that’s your problem. This divides the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ and it doesn’t stack up if we want peace in the world. Human beings are meant to be creatures of imagination, and dividing the world into Us and Them quickly becomes Us vs. Them. It’s a clear failure in imagination. Whatever ‘God’ signifies for you, ‘Us’ vs ‘Them’ ignores all the mixed motives that human beings have for belonging to any group in the first place. The problem is not just pointing out the stubbornness of others who won’t receive the message; the problem is also identifying the message, the substance of the seed, as well as the medium in which to sow it. So (without the ‘W’) what is it that we sow (with the ‘W’)? I’m going to borrow now from 2 artistic creations, in the hope they might have something to say to us, to help us?

First, take the Van Gogh painting on the front page of the service order. It is said to come from a time when the artist was beginning to let the intensity of colour speak to the emotions. For me, it's a picture of contrasts, drawn to our attention by that horizontal line of vision where the ploughed field in foreground bumps up against the golden wheat standing tall in background. The peasant sower figure is there imagining how the rough ground of his hard life might be transformed into the idealistic vision of the plenteous life represented by that golden background – perhaps the life where the poor man really is king. Every culture throughout history has generated the invitation to create a better world, and for religious believers that summons to create a better world is a sacred invitation. We're not abandoned – we're asked to create. And that invitation to creativity is what living in the light of eternity means, to use churchy language. Notice also how the vertical sower figure occupies the only place where that sharp horizontal line between the challenge of the roughly ploughed field and the possibility of future golden fruitfulness is crossed. The sower lives in these 2 worlds – with feet on God's good earth, but with his mind & heart feeling the glory of God's good heaven. The Sower in ministry mediates between heaven and earth. I'm talking not about heaven and earth as places but as metaphors or as spheres of the human imagination. Heaven and earth are part of the same reality and they meet in human endeavour, in the transformation of lives by human work, depicted in this case as sowing and farming.

Now to my second example. I've been reading a bit about Japanese Zen Buddhist koans recently. Koans are sayings or riddles designed to puncture the dominance of the rational mind and the ego, and help us achieve some intuitive purity of experience. A famous one is in the form of a question: 'Can you hear the sound of one hand clapping?' 'What's that all about?', you ask yourself. Is it nonsense? Is it trying to get me to see something I'm missing? Two hands clap, not one. Koans are in the same family as riddles. They don't have answers for you, but they might stir you to experience life differently from the conventions we surround ourselves with. I suggest that the riddle of the Sower is like a koan. It is designed to get you to experience faith differently from what you might expect. The puzzle in the Christian koan of the Sower is in the section which suggests that this riddle is there so they may look but not perceive; listen but not understand – because if they do they might experience the life-changing forgiveness of God. But isn't that the point of the secret Kingdom? Apparently not. Do you not understand this riddle? Is the gospel like one hand clapping? In other words, the reality of God is not to be picked over like a takeaway pizza. We are to puzzle over a mystery, and in fact it is the puzzling which is the mark of faith itself. In that sense it is a secret and we should be pleased to have it so.

Sowing the secret of the Kingdom. This evening I should speak a bit more personally now, about the priest as a sower. It can be a strange business being a priest, you know. On one level, you are expected to be as human as anyone else, undergoing the same struggles and facing the same questions common to us all; for if not, how then

can people relate to you? No good being too heavenly minded. Then a great deal of trust is placed in the priest's hands – trust that he or she will value the lives of those in his or her care, especially at times of fragility or difficulty. And it is a great privilege to be invited in – invited at times of happiness and celebration as well as at times of sadness; or invited to be with people when they are wrestling simply with how to make sense of what it means to believe. There is the expectation that the priest might bring an insight, an encouragement, “a word from the Lord” as it used to be called, a seed in terms of tonight's Gospel. Sometimes that expectation is unrealistic and people suffer massive disappointments when the encouragement doesn't come. But when the expectation is at least partially met, then the relationship between priest and people can be wonderfully fulfilling. And it's a 2-way relationship – he or she gives and receives; the community receives and gives. When I say community I mean both the community of the church and the wider community of the neighbourhood, for the priesthood is a public office.

Now, through all of this, it is good for a priest's ego that he or she is kept fairly close to the ground. So here's not another koan but a joke:

Local fellow says to the priest: “I hear you're moving on. We've enjoyed your company round here; we think you've done a bit of good; and quite a few people are grateful.” “That's very kind of you to say so,” says the priest. I've tried to do what I thought was necessary – raise people's sights a little, encourage them to ask the right questions, that kind of thing. Thank you for your words of appreciation. Anyway (continued the priest), perhaps you'll get someone even better next time.” “I doubt it,” said the fellow; “that's what the last vicar said when he left.”

The truth is of course that a priest brings what he or she brings, and then it is for everyone to work out the vision and its implement it together. I hope we've done that over these last 6 years at St.Margaret's.

Of course it is where we place our trust that matters, and how the Church generally, and this church in particular, is going to advance into the next phase of its life. No-one can predict that, but it's in the nature of trust that we don't need to predict it. What ministry has taught me is that in the church generally we are all required to approach the future with a huge act of trust and above all with seeds of imagination – imagination in worship & spirituality, in what we believe, in the shared care of another, in our dialogue with people of different beliefs, in service of the world, and in sheer friendship. My perception of St.Margaret's is that seeds of imagination are valued enormously – in which case I commend you to yourself. None of us is actually where we were even 6 years ago, and I hope most of us can be thankful for the seeds we've sown together. For me personally, what I have received from this community has been hugely enriching.

My final word then is: sow. And it's the one with a 'w' on the end.  
Amen.