

*“He who has ears, let him hear.”*

St. Matthew 13:9

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If you've been following the Winter Olympics, you likely know that they wrap up today. And perhaps you also know that eleven days from now, the Paralympic Games will begin. They never get the same attention as the Olympics, which is a shame because the athletes who compete at the Paralympic Games are no less incredible athletes, and in many cases much more incredible, because of the challenges that they've had to overcome. As you may know, the Paralympic Games started out in 1948 as the Stoke Mandeville Games; with just 14 servicemen and 2 servicewomen completing in archery. They followed from the revolutionary work being done at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital by a Jewish doctor who was a refugee from Nazi Germany, working with those who were suffering from spinal injuries. At the time, patients were only expected to live for only two years, so the goal was to make their remaining days as comfortable as possible. But Dr. Ludwig Guttman had other ideas, completing altering the care regime, including a plan to get them up and moving. He saw the potential for using wheelchairs for competitive sports, helping to improve their physical fitness, as well as their self-esteem and personal dignity.<sup>1</sup>

On the first day of the 1948 Olympic Games in London he organised an archery demonstration; and ever since, in each Olympic year, competitions for the physically disabled have been organised; with the name officially changing in 1960 to the Paralympic Games. Para-, of course, because they have been held 'alongside' the Olympics. Parallel to the Olympic Games. Much as paralegals work alongside lawyers; and paramedics serve alongside other professionals in the medical system.

So, whenever we encounter a parable, such as we do in this week's Gospel, we need to remember that these stories intentionally put two things, two images, two ideas alongside each other; to challenge us to see how these two things may be alike; or how they may be different. So, a parable is a story that is thrown alongside our lives; thrown alongside us; to teach us something; about God, for sure; and maybe about ourselves. And by using stories Jesus was able to do what lectures would never have allowed him to do. Parable work by stealth. They:

sound absolutely ordinary: casual stories about soil and seeds, meals and coins and sheep, bandits and victims, farmers and merchants.<sup>2</sup>

And because the images are so ordinary, they get past our normal scepticism; they get past our self-confidence before we realise it. They get around our usual excuses for not thinking deeply about such matters; until they get settled in our minds; waiting until that moment when the light suddenly comes on; and the picture comes into focus; and we realise that, all along, he's been talking about us; and our world is turned upside down. Which is perhaps the reason why Jesus ends so many of his stories with the words that we know by heart: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

So, the question for us this week is really quite simple: do we have the ears to

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.paralympic.org/ipc/history>

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, 1993, p. 32.

hear? Can we actually hear what Jesus is saying to us in this week's Gospel; in words that we have heard so often that they likely wash over us without too much thought. In other words, what do we see when we see the images of this week's Gospel alongside our own lives? What is Christ saying about us and about the God who loves us.

For example, what do the various kinds of soil in this week's Gospel say about me? What do they say about the many different ways in which I respond to the Word that Christ speaks in my heart? Where are those moments when my heart is too hard to allow God's Word to put down roots? And where are those moments of carelessness where this Word that God has planted in my heart is unable to grow because of the weakness of my love? And where are those moments of distraction, where my concern for other matters, for things of lesser value, choke off the seedlings of God's Word before they have a chance to grow fully; to produce a good and abundant harvest? What are the many different soils of my life; and how do these soils stifle God's Word.

The parable of the Sower and the Seed and the Soil is much like that seed that the Sower casts off so abundantly: Jesus 'throws it out there' and, if we have the ears to hear, we can choose to measure our lives against it.

In a very direct way, that's what the Season of Lent is all about. Far more than just a time to give us some small luxury, it serves to challenge us to think about what kind of soil we're going to be. What are the birds that carry off the seed of God's Word; the seed of Grace and Love. What are the rocks and thorns and prevent that seed from growing in my life? Where are the times that my heart is so hardened that the Word cannot enter? Where are those moments when I am so distracted that God's Word only makes a difference for a moment or a day? And do I allow the difficult moments of my life to choke out faith and hope?

There is much reason for us to be discouraged of late. We are living in times of great disorder and disunity. We've been living under restrictions and limitations of one form or another for nearly two years now. And so many of the customs and conventions of our social and political world that we once took for granted have been thrown off by forces that we struggle every day to understand. Very much as St. Paul writes in this week's Epistle of his own experience. Like him, we live in disordered times. The news cycle is unrelenting; and in such times it can seem that there is nothing to which we can turn for hope.

But this parable reminds us that the Sower throws out all of that seed with apparently little regard for where it's going to land. The ground may seem hostile to us; but the Sower sows none the less. So, there is always hope; because this Sower refuses to give up. On us; or on our world.

And maybe our task is not to worry about where all of this is going; about things that lie beyond our control. Maybe our task is not to worry about what the harvest is going to look like. Maybe my task is simply to make sure that the soil of my heart is as ready and receptive to that seed, as ready and receptive to that Word, as, by Grace, it can be. Maybe if I'm willing to do the hard, everyday work of faith; of loosening the soil of my heart; of clearing from the field of my soul the rocks and thorns of distraction and worry, maybe if I'm willing to do that, the seed will take root. The end is really God's business. My business is only to be ready.