

**Growing in Faith A Sermon preached in St Mary's, Walton-on-Thames
on Sunday 28th February 2010**

Readings: I Peter 2. 1-10; Mark 4. 1-20

I looked out from our kitchen window this week, and saw red. In fact, what I saw was the branches of three dogwood plants, which I put in to bring a bit of winter colour to the garden; the bare branches of this kind of dogwood (*cornus alba* for those who are interested) are a wonderful bright red. But then I realised that there wasn't very much red, despite the fact that I planted them three years ago. Why are they still tiny? Why have they not grown?

The answer, I'm afraid, is the soil. The soil in the vicarage garden is not conducive to growth. Indeed, I suspect that apart from a load of organic matter that went on last year, it's not had much nourishment for a long time. So I shouldn't be surprised that nothing grows very well, that nothing is fruitful. If I want fruitfulness, I'm going to have to feed that stingy soil.

And Jesus said, 'Listen! Hear! A sower went out to sow ...'. The Parable of the Sower is perhaps the most familiar of them all; though there's a case to be made, however, for calling it the Parable of the Soils. After all, there are two constants in the parable: one is the sower himself, and the other is the seed that is so generously sown; and that seed, says Jesus in v.14, is 'the word'.

What can we learn from these constants? First, it is always God who takes the initiative to reach out to us. I need to remember that, because, like many people, I can often imagine that I have to make the running: to do the right things, say the right words, believe the right things, before God will consider coming to me. But that's the wrong way around. God takes the initiative, always, in revealing himself to us, in sowing his word in our hearts, minds, imaginations and souls; it's God who leads us to faith in the first place; it's God who calls us to go deeper in faith. It's God, as Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 5.19, *who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself*. Throughout, the initiative is God's, and so is the word he sows.

If the two constants in this parable are God and the word, the variable is the soil; and Jesus shows just how variable our soils can be. This isn't a sermon about contrasting the soils (we'll save that for another day). What I want to point to instead is the purpose of all this sowing: and that goal is growth and fruitfulness. The reason the good soil is good is because the seed germinates in it, takes root, and grows; and having grown, is fruitful.

The same encouragement to grow appears in 1 Peter 2.2: *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by you may grow into salvation.* Milk is used in several places in the New Testament as a symbol of what is basic to the Christian life; and this is *spiritual milk* because it comes from the Holy Spirit, and it feeds us in our spirits, in our spiritual lives. The point Peter is making is quite simple: just as babies need food, because without it they will neither grow, nor be healthy; so also, as Christians, we need food for the spirit, food from the Holy Spirit, if we are to reach the maturity in the faith to which we are called. Which is why Peter urges his readers to *long for* this spiritual nourishment. But do we?

Many years ago, I was taking a Sunday afternoon baptism; and about ten minutes before the service, I and the others present heard the loudest, most distressed, sustained screaming I think I've ever heard from a child. Sure enough, this was the baby I was baptising. She kept up that barrage of ear-piercing, mind-numbing, will-to-live-sapping noise right through the service, and was still howling as she was carried down the church path. What was the problem? She was hungry. Amid all the excitement of the baptism afternoon, the family, the friends, the catering, she hadn't been fed. She was longing for food; and she was letting us know in the only way she knew how.

Long for the pure spiritual milk, writes Peter. When was the last time we were so desperate to be nourished by God that we made a song and dance about it, or made a fuss, or changed our priorities, or went out of our way, or risked something new, or changed our habits and normal routines, so that we could be fed by God's word and take in what we need to *grow into salvation* (1 Peter 1.2). Notice, Peter isn't say that feeding on this *pure, spiritual milk* brings us salvation. Salvation remains a sovereign gift of God; as Paul writes: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the*

gift of God — not the result of works, so that no-one may boast (Ephesians 2.8-9). Salvation always comes to us as a gift, but we may still grow into it. We're used to that kind of language in many areas of life: we speak of someone growing into a job, or growing into a position of leadership. So also with salvation: each of us is called to grow up into the salvation we have already received from God.

Now, you may be thinking, 'I've been a Christian for years; why do I still need to be nourished?' For example, we may have forgotten some of the foundational truths of Christian faith, or forgotten to let them go on nourishing us. That's the analysis of the writer to the Hebrews: "In fact," he says, "though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:12-13).

The bottom line, however, is that we all need nourishment. How many of you here this morning are intending to eat something in the rest of the day? I assume everyone. And why are you going to eat? Because you know that your bodies need a certain amount of food if they are to function. So do our souls. So does the life of the spirit, the life of faith.

So what are we to do? Both our readings have something to offer. From I Peter, we are to *Come to him*. Come to Jesus himself, the cornerstone, the foundation of all that we are and all that we do for God. It is no accident that Peter moves directly from beseeching his readers to long for the pure spiritual food, to inviting and exhorting them to come to Christ: for he is the Bread of Life. The more we remember that the last of the baptism promises, 'Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life?', is for each of us, every day of life, then the more we shall find our lives nourished by his. If we are truly to grow in faith, as Peter encourages us to do, it will be in direct proportion to our closeness to Christ.

From the Parable of the Soils comes a blueprint for us all, however long we have been following Christ. First, we hear the word; and by hear, I don't mean listen to a passage of Scripture in such a way that it goes in one ear and out the other. It's much closer to that marvellous phrase from the Prayer Book Collect for Bible Sunday, which exhorts us to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" Scripture.

Next, having heard it, we receive it into ourselves. God sows the seed of his word; it's up to us

to be prepared to accept it. This sermon (though I've deliberately not mentioned the title thus far) is about growing in faith. The reality is that we don't grow in faith simply by taking time out to think great thoughts; or by speculating on the nature of things; or by working out what we think, or what seems to us to be reasonable. If we are truly to grow in faith, it will be in direct proportion to our openness to God's word to us, which comes to us in the Scriptures, and our willingness to take it in, accept it, absorb it, and to let ourselves be changed by it. The initiative is God's, yes, as always; but there needs to be a human, personal response. This is where the analogy between a human baby and our spiritual lives breaks down (as every analogy eventually does). A human baby is fed. As Christians, we are responsible for making sure we are fed, with the spiritual food that God gives us.

And when we open our hearts and minds and imaginations to God's word to us, and receive it, and let it germinate, and take root, and transform us, then look what happens! Look at the fruitfulness when God's message is received: thirty-fold, sixty-fold, one hundred-fold.

There's something here that it's vitally important that we understand: we are fed by God not just so we can enjoy the meal. This is never just about us having a wonderful time, as if we were having dinner at Raymond Blanc's Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, or at the Gavroche. We are nourished by God so we can be fruitful, so we can bear fruit for the sake of others.

If I want my three dogwood plants to grow, I have to nourish the soil. If we want churches to grow, then there needs to be spiritual nourishment in the people. This is why growing in faith is not an optional extra.

In this parish we aim to be "a growing, loving family, with Christ at the centre, reaching out to all". If that Mission Statement truly is to leap off the page and into life, then growing in faith — deepening faith — is just about the most important thing we can do.

Charles Stewart