

If you've been with us over these last few weeks, you'll know that our sermons have been following the Hebrew scriptures and our readings from the Old Testament where we've followed the whole story of Abraham, which I've really enjoyed preaching on Abraham. I've never done that before, but he died in last week's reading. So we'll pick up now with the New Testament. We're done with Abraham, and then maybe at some point we'll come back to all his successes. But we'll turn this week to the New Testament, to the Christian scriptures. And what we find there today is two great, almost typical readings from those scriptures. I think it's helpful to look at them both together and they're both concerned with contrast.

In the passage from Romans, we get a very typical Paul passage and he draws the contrast between walking according to the flesh and walking according to the spirit. In the parable, and again, a very typical gospel parable from Jesus, in the parable, Jesus draws a contrast between the seed that grows and the seeds that don't grow. Notice the verbs in the two contrasts, walking and growing, both dynamic active verbs. And that's not a coincidence because both of them are being used to describe the life of faith. And faith is always active and dynamic.

I had a very odd vicar when I was curate in London. Just to give you an indication of how odd he was, in Lent he used to dye his hair and his beard purple. He said lots of odd things, which thankfully I've forgotten over the years. But he did say some very good things. And one of his sayings that he always said at funerals that I've found myself picking up, he said this. "In our lives, we can either move toward God or away from him. We cannot stand still." And I think that's actually very, very true. The life of faith is active and dynamic. We're either walking towards God or we're walking away. We're either growing in faith or we're not growing in faith. We can't stand still.

Let me tell you about two different men. The first one I'll tell you about, I don't actually know his name, but I do know that he found himself in a terrible pickle. He was stranded in the Arctic. I don't know how he got there, but I do know that he was a very, very long way from safety. And he told a friend later when he was recounting the incident, he said, "I was there out on the ice, thought I was about to die." He said, "I cried out to God. I said, 'God, if you reach out and save me, I'll believe in you.'"

And his friend said, "Well, what happened? Surely the fact that you are here now talking to me means that God did save you."

"No," said the man. "Two Eskimos came past in a snowmobile, picked me up and took me home." I don't know what he was expecting, whether to be transported back. But anyway, he could have seen the whole episode differently. If he'd seen with the eyes of faith, he might have thought the Eskimos were doing God's work, that they were the answer to his prayer.

Now, I do know the name of the second man that I want to tell you about. His name is John Newton. You may know his story. He was captain of a slave ship, doing abominable work, enslaving the people of West Africa, bringing them back to England to be sold. And his ship was caught in a storm and he cried out to God a similar prayer that first man prayed. He prayed, "If you save me, God, I'll serve you." And the winds subsided. And the storm that was troubling him ceased and faith took root in Newton's heart. He gave up the slave trade, campaigned for the abolition of slavery and started to write hymns. And one of the hymns he wrote is Amazing Grace, which we still sing here, as in so many churches all over the world.

We could say that these two stories are about the sowing of two seeds. Both these men had seeds planted in their heart. In one, it came to nothing. In the other it grew into a deep faith, which still impacts us all these years later. Seeds are always small. Seeds are always easy to overlook. They're easily missed. But we might ask ourselves, "What are the seeds of faith in our life? What seeds have been planted that if we don't pay attention to could easily be missed?"

And what about the seeds of faith in the people around us? What seeds have been planted there? What seeds might we plant in the lives of those around us? Which leads me to move on from the seeds to say something about the soil in the parable. There are four different kinds of soil mentioned. Some soil is made into a path, which means that any seed that falls on it can easily be taken away by the birds. Some of the soil is rocky, the soil is shallow, so a root can start, but it comes to nothing because it can't put down very deep roots. Some soil is full of weeds, so any seed that takes off there is choked by the weeds that are around it. But some soil is good and the seeds that fall there can put down deep roots and flourish.

I used to think that these four different types of soil represented four different types of people, four static personality types that remained the same throughout their lifetime. Some were permanently hardhearted, some were impulsive, some always distracted by the needs or the cares of the world. But I've come to see recently that I don't think this parable is actually describing four permanent personality types. Rather what the soils represent are different conditions of the heart, different conditions of the heart at particular moments, moments in time when the seed of faith is being sown.

I don't think any of us exist in one unchanging condition throughout our life. There are seasons and phases. There are times when our heart and our soul might be hard. There might be times when we find our heart soft, fertile soil where seeds of faith can flourish. Whenever faith is being sown in our lives we're inevitably in one of those four seasons, one of those four types of soil that Jesus describes. We've all been callous and hardhearted at some point when we've heard the word and dismissed it. At other times, we've been impulsive and emotionally shallow or overly concerned with mundane matters. Maybe sometimes, by God's grace, we felt our heart ripe and faith has grown and flourished. It's not that one person is always rocky soil and someone else is always fertile soil.

We need to ask ourselves at this moment in time, which of those four soils describes me? What season am I in? I've asked myself that question several times over the years at certain times of my life. I was once preaching a sermon on the heart, which is a big thing throughout scripture. And as I was preparing the sermon, I remember thinking to myself, I was reflecting. I was thinking, do you know, I think my heart's pretty rocky and stony at the moment. So I prayed for a few days that God would soften my heart to make it more responsive to him. In terms of this parable, I prayed that God would make my heart more fertile soil.

And I remember writing in my journal that at the end of the week I felt that that prayer had had an effect. And the same day I wrote that we got a call from some of our best friends who said they'd lost a daughter to suicide. And would I preach at the funeral? Well, we were devastated. These were very good friends and this was a girl we'd known since she was a baby. But I couldn't say no. So I said, "Yeah, I'll preach at the funeral." And I said that not having any idea of what I'd say.

And then a day or two later, I was out running and I wasn't really thinking about anything in particular, but I felt that God put a verse from the Psalms, I felt it just came out of the sky and was planted in my heart. I've never had that feeling before. I've never had it since. And I can't remember what verse it was, but there was a verse from the Psalm God spoke right into my heart. And I knew what it was straight away, that this was the text I was being given for the funeral. And sure enough, unbeknown to me, there were reasons why that verse was particularly relevant to that occasion.

I recognized that as a word from God because that was a week when I'd been preparing my heart to receive it. God had tilled the soil of my heart in the week before so I was ready with a heart made up of rich compost when that word came. Now, of course, that season didn't last, but it did mean that I was prepared for a season of grief and grieving.

So let me leave you with a couple of questions to ponder. First, what type of soil is your heart most like today? Are the seeds of faith falling on rocky ground, being choked by weeds? Or are they landing in rich, deep, fertile soil? And second, what might you do to improve the fertility of the soil in your heart so that faith can grow, mature, and develop? Amen.