

Sermon Notes for Sexagesima

“and bring forth fruit with patience” (Gospel)

“A sower went out to sow” and in a few days I will (if fit!) start the sowings for this year. But the parables, which made sense to many for many centuries, now describe a world to which few relate. Those few who do understand naturally respond “but we do it so much better now – far less waste and far greater, more reliable, yields”. True, but not so true as to discredit the analysis.

Parables are problematic. “That seeing they might not see” and so on is odd. Did the Lord not want to be understood? This is a problem of the original language, which unlike Greek is not well able to distinguish purpose and result. The preacher does his best, but there is no perfect communication. If as in this case the Lord has roughed out an allegorical interpretation, yet that too will be imperfect. There is no perfect communication, yet in our daily lives, and not just in sermons, we act on the basis that we can get enough of our message across. The Lord's teaching was not a mockery, but what could be done for the many.

I have said this before, but it bears repeating. The Lord does not deal in large-scale success, and we should not expect it either. Those who want it will find that the price is “we have undone your work”. There are situations in which we must offer the Good News; but the offer will generally fail. The Lord's message is one of comfort for the Church; if there is much failure, that does not of itself prove that you are doing anything wrong. For even He did not have large-scale success. (Not that this excuses our not trying, or our incompetence.) As for the reasons for failure, nothing has changed. We do not need new categories to analyse our problems, and we do not have (or ever did have) very good remedies against those problems. The devil does not bother to find new weapons, though some weapons work better for him at one time than another. This is the human condition after the sin of Adam.

For at this season we recall the Fall (as creation last Sunday). We are damaged goods; not totally flawed, or we could not recognise the Good News at all, but much weakened in response. “Nearly they fell who stood” as C S Lewis put it; so it is hardly surprising if there are many who fall. We realise how much the various impediments to the seed are at work in us. We are most unwise if we assume that we must be the exceptions, the success stories. It is too soon to tell. Christianity is a hard vocation, and indeed impossible without God's help. The way is narrow, and few there be that find it. That is the Lord's teaching. But the Good News is precisely that; God's help is available.

Available in Word and Sacrament. We are right to maintain, as the Church of England always has, the extensive reading of Scripture (whereas some would have no more read than was preached about) and the sermon (granted that the Homilies were for a time provided because competent preachers were scarce and in the time of reformation many clergy refused to expose themselves to accusations of false preaching). Yet Scripture and preaching is not enough. Yes, as the parable shows, the Lord preached, and we know he could read Scripture in synagogue when this was not a general skill. But there was always more to his ministry than that; much of his healing was by touch – by the imparting of himself. And that is the key to the Last Supper; not “understand this” but “do this”, for the gift is to be not understanding, however inspiring, but himself. The gift and our reception of it cannot be confined to those few occasions when we are able to meet together. It must be extended into life. The daily use of morning and evening prayer does this to some extent, and the Church of England, while only imposing this on the clergy, wanted as many as could to join in it. Of course it can be said privately; but this is a somewhat austere practice, and is not necessary for everyone. But the “good fruit” does not come without personal effort as well as God's help. We do not all need the daily office; we all need some form of self-examination and prayer.

There are no simple solutions to the problems we face in our discipleship. St. Paul made it clear that we neither can nor should go out of this world. We have to perfect holiness within it. We should not eschew all contact with other people – not just because we “ought” to be trying to convert them but because this is the condition of our discipleship. That means discernment about what is and is not acceptable. (I do not think, for example, that we should extend the ban on food sacrificed to idols into food ritually slaughtered in either Jewish or Islamic tradition.) It will be imperfect. It means mistakes; it means disagreements between brethren. But the Lord will not withhold himself from those trying to discern his will and to follow it. With him, we can bring forth fruit.