

Trinity 5A - Holy Trinity, Cuckfield – Matt. 13: 1-9, 18-23, Rom. 8: 1-11, Isa. 55: 10-13

Today's readings come with agricultural themes – an approach often used in the scriptures to make an important point. The basics of farming would of course have been familiar to most people of that time. In the parable of the sower, Jesus uses such everyday imagery to convey the hope and promise of the kingdom. He describes a farmer scattering seed abundantly, knowing that there will be various outcomes. Those seeds are often interpreted as God's word. Every one of which has the potential for growth, but the result depends on where they fall.

It can be said that God's Word comes to us in three ways – through the scriptures, creation and experience. Experience counts and the word can come to us in the everyday circumstances of our lives. The response is down to us – we are the ground on which it can germinate, take root, and defend itself from intruders.

Those who have encountered Ignatian Spirituality, will be aware of a discipline known as the 'Examen'. That might sound rather severe, but essentially, it's a way of prayerfully reflecting on how God's word may have been revealed in our daily experience with people, nature and the events going on around us. Were there particular events or conversations that stood out? Were there times when the divine presence was especially real and alive to you? Did you read something in the scriptures or the news media that might be prompting you to take some action?

In the Epistle, Paul assures us that the Spirit of God dwells in us. The Examen is a way of making connections between that indwelling Spirit and our everyday encounters. That need to seek God's word as this Covid-19 drama unfolds, might be more meaningful than ever before. It is sometimes in those most demanding situations that we can hear God's voice most clearly and powerfully. Prepare the ground by being open to the possibility of finding God in all things – the positives and the negatives.

There is of course nothing new about nations facing challenging times. History shows that easy times have rarely been the norm. Today's Old Testament reading takes us to a tough time in Israel's history. You might be aware that the Book of Isaiah is generally regarded as having multiple authorship over three centuries. Today's text comes from the final chapter of the second Isaiah during the sixth century exile in Babylon.

It's not known what proportion of the Jewish population went into exile. Presumably, many would have remained to work the land. As the primary aim was to take away Jewish identity and minimise the threat of national revival, it might be that only the upper echelons of society were taken. For Jewish people, the land of Palestine and the Jerusalem Temple, which now lay in ruins, was central to their faith. In that thriving community of Babylonia, it seems that the cream of Israel's society was offered some degree of social freedom and economic opportunity. Many went on to become influential and remained

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after the exile ended. But, for others, there was an awareness of their faith being drowned in a culture of multiple gods and extravagant temples. For them, there was an ongoing struggle to worship God in a strange land where other gods dominated. There would have been many tensions in the air between them and those who saw these foreign gods bringing prosperity on a scale never witnessed in the Promised Land.

In this final chapter, Isaiah brings a message of hope. The 'rain and the snow' that 'come down from heaven' represent the power of God that will bring new life to the world. The people are assured that God's word is effective, 'it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For Israel that would become a joyous homecoming, 'For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace'. In measurable time those hopes would be fulfilled.

Fortunately, the faith not only survived against that background of Babylonian culture, but also emerged immeasurably deepened and enriched by the experience. The exile had become a time to study, preserve and make sense of their history and tradition. Much of our Old Testament was written down and edited during this period. But maybe the most important lesson Israel learned was that God was not confined to the Temple and Promised Land. People could access God through prayer, wherever they were. The Jews had discovered that you could find God in all places and circumstances. The catastrophe in the Holy Land became an opportunity for growth.

Our encounters in difficult times elicit many thoughts and emotions. In recent months, some have suffered severe illness or grief. Carers and others who serve us on the front-line have feared for their lives.

Others more fortunate, like myself, were able to spend more time in the countryside, enjoying unusually clear air - the trees around us have certainly been clapping their hands.

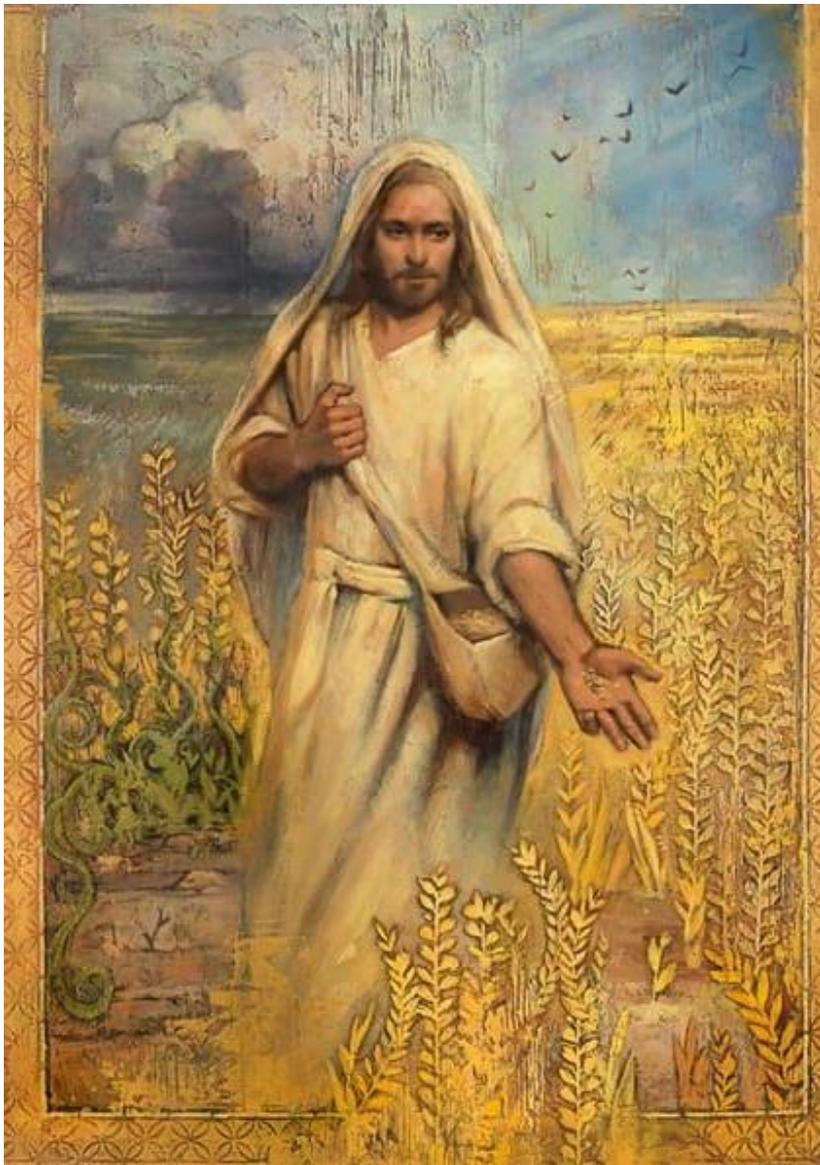
The news has provoked thoughts on issues we might never have considered before, from poverty and injustice through to the environment. When we were buying ventilators by the thousand, some nations could only count theirs on one hand. Demands on Foodbanks reminded us of poverty nearer home. We became aware of the contribution from ethnic minorities, what neighbourliness meant and how human activity had degraded and polluted God's creation.

During that time, we have been distanced from not only our wider families and friends but our places of worship. What has that meant for our faith? Already, the church is asking what it has learned from the experience and how it might be re-imagined as we emerge from this catastrophe. The world around us is certainly set to change. There certainly seems to be a growing consensus that some form of social and economic re-configuration is imperative. Hopefully, everyone has gained a greater sense of interdependence – our

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dependence on each other and all of God's creation. To that the faith community would add our dependence on God.

Life is fragile, and human beings are still far from being in control of the world. This is a time for people at all levels of society to take stock of where we are – to draw some enrichment from the experience. It is of course important that we listen to the words of scientists, philosophers and wise leaders, along with the reflections of artists, composers and writers. But don't overlook the still small voice speaking through the everyday events of your life. Leave it to the Spirit within you to discern God's truth, enabling you to flourish without distractions – preparing you to play your part in the post-pandemic church and world. We all share in that responsibility of ensuring that our gospel of hope is central to the 'new normal.'



Annie Henrie Nader - The Sower