

## The Word Is Seed

The Parable of the Sower is so worked-over, by readers and commentators and those who have preached about it, that it's quite hard to decide what it was really about when Jesus actually told it. We live in such a different land and in such a different scientific world that we make all kinds of wrong assumptions about the meaning. I think a dose of hist and geog is a good idea.

### Seed That Dies

Ancients believed that seed thrown on the ground had to die before it could germinate. The burial of seed symbolises death: so does its loss as grain, just when other foods were running out and there was nothing left to eat. The mysterious presence of death in the midst of life perhaps never felt so real as in this moment of faith: faith in the future, in the harvest to come after the death of the seed.

### Cruel Ground

The precious grain is thrown to its fate in an act of abandoned generosity. It doesn't fall into neat drills in a flat field, but into wild and rocky terrain, with only rare puddles of earth, with rough and sharp vegetation taking up the ground. The birds are as hungry as the sower himself, and follow him to take their plunder. But it would be disaster to lose heart, or restrict the sowing by careful risk management. This harsh land can't be made to yield without waste, and heartbreaking loss. Thin sowing means thin reaping.

### God's Word In Our Words

When we name something, an act of union takes place. We are reaching out to something or someone, and entering into a kind of relationship. A word, and especially a name, opens us up to learning and relating; and from this union comes fruitfulness, even love. The presence of the word installs what we have named in our lives, to be discussed, or, in the case of a person, addressed. The name of another person becomes a charged thing, powerful, laden with meaning. When we first learn a name, we know little or nothing about the person named. As we learn the person, the

name becomes more and more full of meaning, to be spoken with respect and awe. Words can soon become sacred, so that we can use them like prayers. I feel this awesome mystery reaches its highest power when parents name a child. They've given life to a new person, and now they bestow a name which will be bonded to this person, and may become a holy word, perhaps to many people. The name will always convey, in a sort of holy shorthand, all that the person has come to mean; spoken with love, it will be the most powerful word, as when the risen Jesus says *Mary*, and the Gospel says: *she knew him*.

### God Calls Us By Our Own Name

God bestows our name on us, as the prophet knows when he says *He pronounced my name while I lay in my mother's womb*. Often we mistake the name of another, calling him by wrong or improper things. But God knows what to call us from eternity, knows us as one day we shall be, when we see him face to face and become like him. What God names, in eternity, springs into being in time: as yet unrevealed, in potential form, we are already his children. We journey into our unfurling, *first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear*. But even then, we are only a seed: something more must happen to us before we reach our fulfilment, the purpose for which we were grown. And this is in the mind of the Sower, whose word does not return to him empty, without having fulfilled its purpose.

### The Sower's Risk

I'm sure this parable was originally told to tired apostles, returning disconsolate from what they felt was wasted effort. We should look beyond them, even beyond the Church: look to the Father, who sends his Son, whom John calls *the Word*, into a world that does not know him and will not accept him. This risk, this daring of God should open our hearts to a new courage, our own readiness to risk ourselves for his will to be done, his Kingdom to come. The harvest, we are told,

even in this unpromising land, will be  
phenomenal.

*Fr Philip*