



SOWING THE SEEDS

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT gives an ecological reading of the parable of the sower, Matthew 13:1-22.

Matthew 13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

... 18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Elaine Wainwright is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing a Wisdom Commentary on Matthew's Gospel.



We have celebrated the fifth anniversary of Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, influential within the Catholic community and in the global religious and scientific communities. It marked the growing consciousness within the human community that we share our common home, Earth, with all its other inhabitants and

life-forms. This consciousness is deepening.

One contribution to this shifting consciousness is through reading the biblical text being attentive to the human characters and to the other-than-human participants in the biblical drama. Such a reading, in its turn, re-reads us.

Matthew 13:1-9, the Parable of the Sower accompanied by an explanation Mt 13:18-23 is well known. Like many parables, it is grounded in the material. We read of sowers and seeds and types of soil. Reading ecologically invites us to allow this materiality to function in our making meaning of the text.

Parables Taught by the Sea

Jesus's teaching in parables is located specifically – and explicitly – in a particular location: at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. Because of the crowds gathering, Jesus gets into a boat and teaches from there. The location is significant as the earth and its constituents together with the sea will provide the material elements which Jesus parables while a boat on the edge of the sea provides the context from which he will teach. There is a rich web of interconnected material elements that set the context for Jesus's teaching in parables.

Drawing on Everyday Experience

Jesus begins the collection of parables with the invitation: "Imagine a sower". The crowds probably imagined a slave or tenant farmer working on one of the large Herodian or Roman estates that were becoming numerous in first-century Galilee. Some may well have been slaves and tenant farmers themselves. The crowd probably imagined wheat or barley seeds being sown, two of the most common grain crops of the regions of Nazareth and Sepphoris at that time.

The parable draws readers into the ecosystem or ecocycle of sower and seeds: "Some seeds fell on the path", "other seeds fell on rocky ground", "other seeds fell among thorns" and "other seed fell on good soil".

Even though this first parable does not contain the formula repeated as the introduction to most parables in Matthew, "the kin(g)dom/*basileia* of the heavens is like ...", it concludes with the invitation: "Let anyone with ears listen". Listen to what the parable has to say.

To listen to the parable is to listen to Earth's processes and to human engagement in those processes so that all Earth's beings may flourish.

Our Participation

Classical scholar Stephanie Nelson in *God and the Land*, her study of ancient agriculture, says "because farming is inescapably a part of human life ... it may provide a clue to what is most basically human and so a clue to our place in the cosmos."

Her words affirm Jesus's use of parables informed by his agricultural experience of Galilee which draws us to discern how farming may be considered "inescapably a part of human life" today.

Compared to the sowing method described in the

parable and still practised in some poorer regions of the world, most of us rely on farming done by machinery. In our so-called "developed world", we can live without contact with agriculture, or even gardening on a small scale, and so be divorced from the processes which the parable speaks of.

Perhaps with this parable comes our invitation to engage with the processes of sowing, tending and harvesting on a small scale in our own garden, or in a local community garden.

In Mt 13:10, the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the crowds in parables. His reply indicates that they have not the eyes nor the ears to engage with what the parable is evoking. This is illustrated by the explanation of the parable that is attributed to Jesus. For example Mt 13:19: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart: this is what is sown on the path."

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus uses familiar, earthy imagery – seeds, stone, soil – to bring the listener to greater understanding. Matthew 13 with its agricultural and ecological parables extends to us the invitation: hear then the parable of the sower. And if we hear the parable with the deep consciousness of being one life form on Earth among others, our understanding of the Gospel of Matthew can function to inform an ecological conversion or a deepening of an already formed ecological consciousness. 🍷

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