

## **Sermon for 16 July 2017 at 8.00am (Trinity 5)**

**Pat Hemsley, Licensed Reader**

We've been visiting some French friends in Brittany this last week and on Monday we trekked with them across the huge bay of the Mont St. Michel from the shore to the island and back again. It's a wonderful walk, but a dangerous one and so the crossing must be done with a guide. Ours was a very genial and knowledgeable man and during the six hours that we walked, he stopped regularly to teach us about the things we were seeing, the wildlife, the tides and winds, the geography and the history of that area. All very interesting... except that he was, of course speaking in French – and with a local accent at that! My French is good, but rusty and Phil's is basic. Our friends' command of English is similar.. one good, but rusty, the other very little. The guide spoke no English at all and so, as you can imagine, there was a great deal of translation going on.

What was interesting was that, for the first part of the walk, things went really well. I listened intently and understood almost everything, Phil listened and picked out odd words and so, together with my translation, was also able to understand. Towards the middle of the trek though, the guide's words were sometimes blown away on the wind. As the rest of the group (all French) became more animated and questions were asked, I needed more help with translation from my friends. Phil and I still managed to understand the majority of what our guide was telling us, but there were things we needed to puzzle out ourselves. But by the time we were on the homeward stretch, four and a half hours later, we were tired enough not to be able to concentrate and although we heard the guide's words and understood odd bits, we really couldn't have cared less. His information was definitely falling on stony ground, as all we wanted was to be back in the car!

In a similar place by the sea, Jesus was also gathered with a crowd, for whom he meant his words to be a guide. He wanted to teach them about his new kingdom, about who he was and what he was about. However, he knew that many of them had expectations of him that were not going to be realised and would be puzzled by what he said. For those and many others in the crowd, his teachings would be as if in a foreign language. So he offered some translation, in the form of parables – and specifically today, the parable of the sower. And if that weren't enough, Matthew provides yet more translation in his own explanation of the parable – although that, of course wasn't available to those listening to Jesus on the Galilean shore; they just got the story.

So, Jesus is talking about his gospel message, knowing this; some would hear his words, but the words wouldn't get past their ears, wouldn't touch hearts or minds and would quickly fade away. Others would hear, would become excited and interested, but forget the words when turmoil and trouble arose. Yet more would hear and understand the words and resolve to act upon them, but then life would strangle the enthusiasm. One group would be truly affected by what they heard and understood and this would enable them to change and to live as God's people in his new kingdom.

If Jesus knew that not everyone among the crowd that day would understand his words and bear fruit, then he knows the same is true for us. In a sense, he's saying that we're not all going to get something from everything he's teaching us, but that is actually alright. This should be a tremendous comfort and encouragement for us, when we hear his words and find them difficult to understand. The truth is the good news of the kingdom of God is so hard for us to understand that it is only through the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit that we can hear it at all.

However, Jesus keeps on sowing his seeds, speaking his words to us – in the Gospels, in our prayers, in sermons and in discussions with others. There'll be times when we are alert, concentrating and receptive when we'll hear, understand and respond well– just like the beginning of our walk. There'll be other moments, when just getting on with all that life (and the walk) brings means that we hear, but we're too burdened with worldly concerns to understand completely. That's when those around us, in our home groups and our worshipping community, can really help by serving as translators, perhaps bringing some clarity to our thinking. And of course, there'll be times when we're just too tired, or distressed, even to listen properly and all but a few of the words will fly away on the wind. We'll have heard and understood very little in our barren desolate place.

Yet words are very powerful things, with a life of their own; and particularly so when they are the words of God. In the quiet moments after our Mont St. Michel walk, some of the forgotten words of the guide came back. Deep in a corner of consciousness, we had heard and remembered and then, talking through with our friends, we were able to recapture much more of what he'd taught. So finally, we took away not only a wonderful memory, but a much clearer understanding of the nature of that immense bay. So it is with God's word – often in quietness and stillness, we will remember more than we think and as we puzzle things through, in God's grace the Spirit will work to translate for us, so that the seeds of God's words may grow and thrive within us.

Jesus understands our spiritual journey, with all its struggles, all its highs and lows. That's why he keeps throwing seed at us, so that when we're ready, we'll be able to receive it ... and to become sowers like him. He will continue to speak to us throughout our lives, in prayer, in the lives of other people and in the gospels of the Father's love which we need to read and re-read. He'll speak in our lives, too, if we allow him to—speaking to others through us as we sow his seed everywhere we go. Some of what we say will not take root. Much of it will not bear fruit, but we're not to worry. All that God asks of us is that we sow his words to others, as extravagantly as he sows them to us.