

Heavenly Father, thank you that through Jesus you love and accept us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, as we think about the words of scripture, help us to take this to our hearts. Amen.

- Breaking news!! I've just received the report from OfsFarm (that's the Office for Standards in farming), about the farmer in our Gospel reading
- OPEN ENVELOPE AND FEIGN SURPRISE It's 'Requires Improvement with elements of Serious Weaknesses'.
- I'll just read the overview: The field is a medium sized field which shows evidence of little care being taken with it to control weeds, remove stones etc. A good dose of potent fertilizer and repeated weedkiller treatments would quickly increase yield. On their visit, inspectors found little evidence of any planning in the practice of the farmer. He seemed not to have ploughed the field and not to be using any form of seed dispersal agent except his bare hands. This means that although he clearly worked hard and showed real enthusiasm for the job he did not manage to focus on the more fertile areas of the field but instead scattered seed everywhere, including, we noticed, large amounts of the hard dry ground of the path. The consequent wastage of seed was large and the yield lower than the targets we set last year. Although it is acknowledged that the harvest was good, it could have been better with more careful sowing and greater use of humanly produced aids.
- God has been weighed in the balance of human expectations and found wanting.
- But he seems to go on scattering the seed regardless and in all the most unlikely places. After all he chose you!
- I am sure it is no co-incidence that there is a rise in accountability and expectations on human beings and a similarly huge rise in stress and anxiety.
- And I am sure it is no co-incidence that more and more people are battling with mental health issues and low self-esteem as the inhuman but human set targets they are required to reach constantly elude them.
- The guiding principles of these expectations are value for money, a competitive edge, and greater productivity. And all in the name of progress. And the cost of failure is often loss of income, and consequent instability. That's condemnation.
- But the word of the kingdom says *'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'* There is no place for low self-esteem and anxiety in the Kingdom of God.
- Perhaps that's why the Farmer scatters the seed so widely , because he just doesn't care what the judges of the world think about his method? Or maybe it's because he cares so much that he doesn't want to miss anyone out with his life-giving seed?
  - Through Jesus we are not condemned. We stand redeemed and forgiven with our heads held high.
- Jesus Christ, the Son of God came to live in our finger-pointing world and they pointed the finger at him alright. As we heard last week he was accused of being a drunkard, a glutton and mixing with all the wrong people. He was accused of trying to start a rebellion and making himself king. He was accused of being a rabble rouser and desecrating the temple and breaking the Jewish Law. But *'Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.'*
- He died with the sins of the world carried on his outstretched arms. It really was human sin that killed him. Sin does kill.
- Sin really does kill. Now, even before we die. It divides. It creates suspicion. It brings resentment. But probably most of all it makes us feel just awful as we hide the secrets that we really don't want anyone else to know and ignore the pain of the world's victims. And Christ was ignored, deserted on the cross.
- However, if you are not sinful, sin has no power. And therefore although he was divided from his Father on the cross, the door was never closed because the relationship was never broken by sin.
- So for Jesus, death had no hold and sin had no victory.
- And this would all be theory were it not for the reality of the resurrection. Jesus broke the power of death because it had no hold on him.

- The remarkable thing is he has broken it for us as well. As St Paul tells us on various occasions. *'We are the body of Christ'*. That's the definition of the Church. We have Christ alive within us. We receive the Spirit of Christ through baptism. We receive the body of Christ through Communion. We receive him through prayer. We receive the Spirit of Christ every time we turn to him and admit our need of help.
  - And if Christ is alive, we must be alive too.
- *'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'* That's the last line of today's reading from Romans.
- And because the profligate farmer sowed the seed in the rocky ground of my heart, I'm beginning to believe that I am loved and lovable. And that has a knock on effect on my self-esteem and my self-worth. And I begin to see the truth in St Paul's words, *'To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.'*
- And Jesus has given us a direction to head in, the Kingdom of God
- Of course I still have days when the world seems against me. When I think of how little I have managed to achieve and what foolish decisions I have made in my time.
- I still have days when the slough of despond threatens to descend and life seems unfair.
- But actually these are the days when I am measuring myself by the exacting, inflexible and unforgiving standards of the world. *'For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh'*.
- And it's days like these when I start wishing I were someone else, or life were different. I'm living according to the things of the flesh. And where does that lead? *'To set the mind on the flesh is death.'* Certainly metaphorically at the moment but ultimately literally as well.
- And then I go to bed. But when I wake up, I'm usually due in church fairly early on to pray and prayer has a remarkable way of reminding me that Jesus lives and dies by different standards. The farmer sows profligately just because of people like me, who need a lot of seed to get anything to grow at all. And I remember to set my mind on the things of the Spirit again because *'those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.'*, and *'to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.'*
  - And I remember about the importance of acceptance and forgiveness and victory and a future.
- The parable of the sower is often a parable that's used as a sort of cautionary tale. Look to the superheroes of faith who produce so much more fruit that you and I can ever hope. They've produced a hundred fold and you can manage only a measly thirty fold. That requires improvement!
- But at the Harvest the field will be harvested corporately as the body of Christ rather than individually as grains of wheat. And you get the feeling that the farmer is just delighted we are included rather than worrying too much about whether we're good enough. In fact you get the impression that he knows we're not good enough but he loves us anyway.
- Which is all wonderful. But where's the challenge? Because surely a sermon is supposed to have a challenge.
- Well I think the challenge I want to stress at the moment is not about what we do, but how we feel about ourselves.
  - How much worry and anxiety, stress and low self-esteem are a plague and a constant deadening influence upon our lives.
  - Because at the moment there are even more reasons to be anxious with all the extra uncertainty caused by the Corona Virus.
- So if you hear the whisper of God speaking to you through the words of scripture, remember that that this whisper is audible because you have the Spirit of Christ within you. So he's obviously present and you're obviously listening, which is a good first step. That sounds like some good soil to me.
  - And if you do feel God speaking to you about anxiety or stress, then go one step further and trust that the speaker, the Holy Spirit will be with you and you have nothing to be anxious about as long as you live by the aspirations of faith, the Kingdom of God, rather than the aspirations of the world, which are just so much less worthy.
  - And see how that makes you feel! And if you're brave enough, tell a Christian friend! Amen.