

## Seeds, soil and solidarity – USPG Sermon for Sunday July 12

*‘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.’  
(Matthew 13 v. 23)*

*May I speak in the name of our loving, generous God who brings life in all its fullness. Amen*

Warm greetings from the Chapel here in USPG, it’s a real pleasure to be with you this morning as we all continue on this strange journey of living with this pandemic.

In the midst of so many powerful experiences of loss and emotions of anxiety and uncertainty, I suspect there’s one part of peoples’ lives that has thrived and benefitted as a result of the sun and the attention – our gardens and window boxes. Gardening may well have proved something of a spiritual refuge for many – for there is something uplifting, hopeful, regenerative in the nurture of plants and in watching seeds germinate and reach up, leaves unfurling – a witness to something bigger than ourselves – the bounty of creation, the resilience of life itself – and to the future – of the blooms or fruits to come.

Let me take you for a moment to another garden, it’s in the grounds of a University – seven hours ahead of us, in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. An example of self-sufficient gardening – that puts food on the table – the gardeners, however, surprisingly for an urban environment are indigenous peoples, the Lumad, evacuated from Mindanao, about 1000 kilometres to the South. Pushed off their lands by the military and commercial mining interests, they have claimed sanctuary in universities and churches.

Lockdown in the Philippines has not simply been difficult or inconvenient. Around 30,000 people have been thrown into overcrowded and infection-friendly jails.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has provided an excuse. Just last week a new Anti-terror law was introduced effectively bringing in martial law. Opposed by the churches,<sup>2</sup> it is highly likely to lead to an escalation in human rights abuses.<sup>3</sup>

Indigenous groups, in particular and those who stand in solidarity with them or provide support, notably the churches and their leaders, have been subject to attacks on online and in the flesh, with threats and arrests against the backdrop of a new ‘shoot to kill’ policy for those deemed to be breaking the rules on lockdown.

Throughout, the churches have provided practical assistance – with education, health, the provision of life’s necessities - through programmes like the Abundant Life programme, which USPG has the privilege to be involved with supporting. Church leaders have stood up with extraordinary courage to the government and denounced the violence and abuse of indigenous groups and others. I have met a number of priests and bishops from the churches – and frankly, I’ll be honest, their testimony

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<sup>1</sup> The jailing of human rights activists, journalists and clergy is not new, but the situation has got worse during the pandemic. In 2017 a bishop was arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges:

<https://www.uspg.org.uk/newsold/philippines26517/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://uspglive.org.uk/wpress/2020/06/anti-terror-bill-in-the-philippines/>

<sup>3</sup> Human rights abuses in the Philippines have been covered widely in the world press. There was even a piece in the satirical magazine Private Eye, ‘Postcard from Manila’ 19 June p. 20.

and their commitment to standing in solidarity with marginalised and persecuted groups has sometimes brought me to tears.

Our gospel reading gives us a very familiar parable: The Sower and the seed. We know the story well; it is beloved of Sunday schools for obvious reasons, but beyond the crayon pictures, the parable speaks of a much more challenging context: The parables talk of a crisis, a situation of conflict, to a decision one way or another – its wheat or tares, good soil, poor soil.

This is echoed in our reading from Romans (8 vv 1-11), where Paul speaks of two sharply contrasting worldviews, regimes or laws – that of death and sin (in the flesh) a life focussed on worldly power and greed and that life lived with the freedom of the Spirit – lived towards God in the Spirit of Christ. That stark distinction is something that some Christians, like my Filipino friends find it easy to understand. As indeed did Jesus, who had been denounced by the powers of the day, accused of being Beelzebuub, of the devil.<sup>4</sup>

But the kingdom of God is also a mystery, difficult to grasp. And the parable rests on a beautiful confusion: For despite Jesus's explanation, again and again people identify with the seed not the soil. They instinctively think of the soil as they place they have landed – their family, community, country. All the things that allow people to flourish, to be 'healthy and wealth and wise' reflecting good fortune, for which we should be grateful; with all those things that frustrate, produce poverty, discrimination, even persecution clearly speaking of bad or poor soil. Not a place we want to land. And so, we may feel pity – or compassion for those in challenging and difficult circumstances: They are in a rocky place and could be picked off by the powerful, greedy forces of this world.

And that makes sense, the indigenous groups in the Philippines, for example, are being pushed off their ancestral lands that have always nurtured and sustained them. They find themselves pushed to the edges of the land, to the stony margins or hemmed into urban places.

But this is not what Jesus is saying. He flips our natural thinking. We are the soil, we receive the Gospel, the transforming seed of life. We are either - the path, the rocky place or the thorns – or - we are that rich, dark soil: A place, above all - that receives, a place of depth and generosity, a place for bearing the word and allowing it to take root and to be fed by who we are, and just like the breaking down of organic material releases nutrients that feed the roots of our plants, so too a dying to self, to the ego, involves a breaking down, a breaking open, a vulnerability and a release of gifts in the service of the Gospel. We are not called to be hard surfaces, self-sufficient, unyielding, focussed on our own identity and security, but to be vulnerable, open to transformation and growth towards the unknown future that God intends for us.

There is a danger that we look upon our sisters and brothers in more challenging circumstances either with pity ('I just can't imagine it, thank goodness I'm here') or perhaps with an admiration which idolises their courage ('I'm not sure I would be so courageous').

Our sisters and brothers of the churches in the Philippines are however like us, first and foremost receivers and bearers of God's transforming grace. Their actions are 'not in their own strength', but

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<sup>4</sup> (Matthew 12:24)

deeply rooted in prayer and worship – a deeply joyful worship. They seek to be agents of the Kingdom. And in that, sorrow and joy go together hand in hand. If it is a rich soil, infused with a resilience and courage, a soil that produces the rich fruits of hospitality, of solidarity, of compassion and friendship, then it is fed by Christian life firmly anchored in worship and an openness to God.

Of course, they deserve our support in prayer and solidarity and even, where possible, our financial support - for we are one in Christ. For we are all having to learn afresh what it means to be Church, even what it means to 'come into his presence with thanksgiving and be glad in him with psalms'. We are having to 'dig deep' into ourselves, as we come to terms with our losses; to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be Church in our local community. As we do, we should be encouraged by the examples of resilience, faithfulness, courage from across the world. Local and global mission go together – and the only limits to prayer and solidarity, the only limits to the transforming word taking root, to new shoots and fruit – lie in our hearts, in our capacity to give that nurturing space, openly and freely to the Spirit of God to work within. Amen

*Rev'd Duncan Dormor, General Secretary, USPG*