

What motivates this particular sower?

(Matthew 13.3-9)

Jesus told them many things in parables, saying 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!' (NRSV).

As we read this passage, from a well-known parable, everything depends on the interpretation that Jesus gives to it a few verses further on. As we have heard this passage on many occasions, in worship or in private reading, the solution of the puzzle is recorded in our memory as Christians. It is more clearly evident for us than for the disciples. The word of God blossoms only under certain conditions. It does not bear fruit unless the human heart, compared to the earth, is cleared of the brambles of riches, loss of spiritual depth, and manifold temptations.

One day, as I was thinking about this passage, the sower in the Gospel intrigued me. He does not fit into the picture of the "august practice of the sower", careful not to waste, casting seed over the field, prepared in advance. If now it is machines that do the work, the purpose is the same. The intention is to obtain the best return, in the most favourable conditions, with the least possible expense. The harvest is the motivation. The time for sowing is chosen with the harvest in view.

The gospel sower begins in traditional fashion. He gets up. He almost certainly goes out early, and at the right season for sowing. The sack, slung over his shoulder, is full of seed. The text says that he goes out 'in order to sow' He goes on foot. As he sows, his activity is haphazardly controlled. Perhaps his sack overflows or has a leak. He drops seeds. The seeds fall, by mistake, all along the path and even on the field.

Is this man so happy go lucky, or even preoccupied by something else, that he does not realize that he is losing his precious seeds? One does not need to be a professional farmer to know that the edge of the path, with its pebbles and scrub, is not suitable ground for seedtime and harvest.

I remember seeing people sowing millet in Africa. Several sowers stood in a line. Each had a small gourd holding the seed. With the same movement, they deposited one, or several, of the precious seeds, onto a small hillock pierced by a shaft. They immediately closed the shaft. At the end of the line someone playing a tam-tam gave rhythm to the movement. Those sowers did not risk casting their grains here and there.

Whether a carefree attitude or prodigality, it looks as though the worker had nothing to gain from sowing for his employer. Perhaps he cared little about a lost percentage that could have been avoided. Perhaps, again, he was a young man in

a hurry to finish his day in order to go and dance or drink with his friends in the evening.

As we read the text carefully, this reconstruction lacks conviction. We are given details of what happens to each armful, we could even say to each grain that fell. It was not indeed on one day that the sun dried the shoots on the path that the grains fell among the pebbles and were eaten by the birds, that the thorns grew and prevented the seeds from sprouting. It was not in one day that the sower was able to note the yield from the good soil and to count it exactly as a hundred, sixty or thirty fold.

This means that after a rather bizarre sowing, the sower retraced his path, day after day. He knows exactly where the seed has fallen. He is personally aware what has happened to the dead seed, the aborted growth or the promises of harvest.

This does not amount to lack of care or irresponsibility. What then makes a clearly careful man sow, in spite of everything, on ground where the yield was lost in advance?

Is this particular sower an adventurer, a fearful punter or a happy go lucky person? He gets up and says to himself 'I am going to try once more; I am going to give an opportunity to the soil that has no depth, to the pebbles, to the thorny areas. Who knows what might happen?' He sets out with a positive expectation. He is not wearied by the negative results. He possesses confidence. He hopes that a miracle will produce good earth. All is not lost, the birds must also live, the ones who neither sow nor reap! Perhaps even the seeds smothered by the thorns will be of use to the ants?

The sower is required to spread the grain. He has plenty of it. He is not the judge of good and evil, of good and bad terrain. He achieves his mission. He gives account to the master of the harvest.

The last verse of the passage contains a strong warning: 'Let anyone with ears, listen!' This is translated in French by a subjunctive verb 'let him listen'. The subjunctive expresses a wish, but the Greek text has an imperative in the second person singular.

To each of his hearers, and now to his readers, Jesus orders 'listen'. This very sower is you, you must imitate him, and this is your model as my sower.

Have we, have I, understood the motivation of the sower? Am I ready to share what I have, material goods, cultural heritage, and spiritual assets? Will I share with people who appear unworthy, not receptive, or whom I fear will misappropriate my gifts? The labels, the categories that control our relationship with others lead us to 'charitable correctness'. We, therefore, hesitate to give a coin to a homeless person as we fear that he might buy a litre of red wine or to a non governmental organization because one knows that the money will go on the private trips of the officials in their four-wheel drive, air conditioned vehicles.

Finally, more simply, where are we in our conversations, our friendships, and the way we welcome people, acknowledging that it is difficult not to be selective, push aside or to give only where we receive in return?

Are we now able to reply to the question at the head of this reflection? 'What motivates this particular sower?'

Four years ago, in Burgundy, Jacques Sarano asked us: 'Can one act kindly?' That is the attitude of the sower, his deep inspiration. He displays a fundamental basic kindness, a confidence that faces the risk of defamation, of failure, of a wicked retort, but which is also open to a formidable harvest!

This sower is indeed Christ who scatters his word all the time and everywhere. He is grieved, throughout the gospel, when the good news is not believed, when it falls on indifference, or stirs hatred. Christ marvelled when he saw the Gospel arousing faith in an unexpected place.

Let us rise each morning, with a light heart, full of hope, to sow without counting, without calculating, without speculating, ready to risk everything in the person we meet. It is the master of the harvest who asks this of us. He has already taken every risk for that person, and it is to him alone that we have to render an account. He will reward us where we have dared to lose . . .

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