

Gentrification of the heart

This sower seems a bit careless, don't you think? (*The Gospel was Matthew's account of the Parable of the Sower – Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23. You can read it [here](#)*).

There he is, no doubt distracted and on his smartphone (or first century equivalent), chucking seeds here and there without any heed to the varying terrain. I hope he's got professional indemnity insurance, since there's obvious negligence involved.

As I read the gospel, and on the theme of sowing seeds, I had a faint recollection that the word *broadcast* had a place in seed-sowing. And sure enough it does. Apparently there is *broadcast sowing* and there is *precision sowing*. Broadcast sowing is what we have with our friend here: a method of seeding that involves scattering it over a large area (though presumably not over a hugely inhospitable one), whereas, *precision sowing* aims for precise spacing and depth. More Gardeners' World and modern day agriculture, you might say.

But this is a parable, for heaven's sake, so let's not get side-tracked by the metrics, the cost-benefit analysis, the question of sower-employee engagement in the task, or the profit margin on any eventual harvest. As parables go, it seems pretty clear in what it means; and in fact it ends with an explanation. At least, of sorts.

We are told that when anyone hears the Gospel and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; in the parable, this is what was sown on the path.

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root. The Word stays with them for a while but when trouble arises, they fall away.

In other hearers, the cares of the world and the desire for fame and fortune (and maybe, in contemporary terms, a defined-benefit occupational pension scheme) choke the word, and it yields nothing.

But as for what was sown on good soil, this is she who hears the word and understands it and who bears fruit and yields a rich harvest.

We could stop there, but I hope you won't mind if we press on a little, not least to see if we can – to milk the simile – *dig* around to see how we might lay hold of Jesus' meaning, here from our position as 21st century people.

The question we might explore is not 'where am I in those four types described in the parable' but perhaps *what are the factors* that shape those different responses as found in our day?

A week or so ago I found myself thinking about *gentrification*. This had been prompted by reminiscing on the London I knew when I first moved here more than three decades ago. The particular trigger had been the sudden memory – accompanied by a strong craving – of a café on Villiers Street, Charing Cross. On its menu it always had baked jam rolypoly and custard. A delicacy in my book, and virtually impossible to find elsewhere.

But the café is long gone, forced out by increasing rents in the early 1990s. Forced out by the gentrification of Villiers Street. For those of us who knew central London a little while ago, the changes are marked. Whole areas have changed dramatically.

The process is that of gentrification, meaning something like this: people and money set about improving a district; this leads to a rise in property prices and rents; the process tends to displace people from their homes and businesses.

The result is a very different neighbourhood and demographic.

We see it all the time. Some people lament its effect. Others welcome the 'improvements'. Some people benefit from the increased value of the homes they own in these changed areas.

For others, the result of this process occasions something like grief – or at least deep disquiet, for what may result is a kind of social and architectural blandness, a samey-ness, a monochrome world of narrow social stratification and lego-like architecture designed, one sometimes thinks, to make human persons feel insignificant.

On the positive side, supporters cite lower crime and less low-life, better maintained buildings and what are enticingly termed 'public realm improvements'.

You may think these trends are a social and societal good. You might feel a little more mixed. Yet, whatever your view, it seems inescapable that some of our human variety and untidiness gets swept away by the process.

This isn't the place to explore this as a social phenomenon. We are after all, only a church, and we ought not to meddle in such matters (!) [I don't really mean that].

What I wanted to raise, in connection with God's Word and the degree to which it finds a nurturing and hospitable environment in those who hear it, is what struck me as *the gentrification of the heart*, or soul.

And it made me wonder what your experience has been. How receptive, how tender, do you think you are to all those intimations of God's word – those seeds that visit you? We have explored, many times, the way in which we are shaped by our experiences – good and bad, beautiful and healing or difficult and scarring – and by the facts of our lives: class, ethnicity, gender and orientation.

They make us who we are and so shape our responses to, and engagement with, the world and one another. But what about, I found myself

wondering, some of the other changes that can occur in us, to our hearts and souls, as we travel through our lives?

Perhaps they are not unlike changes to our bodies. Do we gain a little weight in our *thinking* that slows us down a little? Do we lose a little *flexibility*? Is there, perhaps, a hardening of the *ought-eries* just as their might be, for some, a hardening of the arteries? And in case any of you millennials feel free from these risks, beware! We can begin to experience these changes of attitude and receptivity and attentiveness and open-mindedness and perspective pretty early on. Indeed very early on.

What then might *gentrification of our hearts*, our souls *look like*? Perhaps, initially, a kind of tidying up and improvement exercise: removal of the embarrassing bits, a paint job maybe, improved railings around the front garden of who we are. A smoothing down of the rough edges. Some 'public realm improvements' and gussy-ing up of how we see ourselves. Some protection maybe against those inconvenient, unwelcome intruders – like the demands of sympathy, justice, compassion, who knows?

Or perhaps we develop, like calluses, the kind of self-assurance, even self-assertion, enjoined on us by the spirit of the age? Maybe our spiritual gentrification involves, like its outward equivalent, the displacement of the embarrassing poor, this time our own non-material poverties about which we are uneasy. Could it be that such a trend reduces the risks involved in remaining open to others and to the divine, so that when the seed reaches us, it is not properly nurtured?

If we ourselves are at risk of a gentrification of the heart, we ought to understand that we may do this in part to protect ourselves. To be alert and attentive to what goes on is costly. We can feel overwhelmed. No wonder we might take steps to protect ourselves, change our mind-set, drive the troublesome things out of our interior neighbourhood, put up a few shutters.

Gated communities, whether outward and physical or interior and spiritual, may bring some comfort but they close off the intimacies and the encounters which mark both the best of human

community and the most essential dispositions of the spiritual life.

Let's assume that it is broadcast sowing, not precision sowing, that is God's preferred approach to calling us. And that those intimations and moments – those seeds – are generously and indiscriminately scattered throughout every second of our lives and are not, for a moment, confined to so-called *serious* or *religious* moments or expressions. This, then, means that we are never in a place so terrible, so dark, so shameful, so lonely, so grief-stricken or so destitute as to be beyond the reach of these divine invitations, these divine sowings.

Our job is to be as receptive to them as we possibly can, and trust to them. And to remain on guard against everything that gradually seeks to close down our receptivity, our child-like openness. That may be the kind of gentrification of our hearts as I have described, or some variation, or something else.

Maybe the simplest observation is that we must never insulate ourselves against God's reach, or devise for our inner selves – our hearts - gated communities which keep us from hearing Her Word.

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