Sermon Outline on the Parable of the Sower

The sower sows the word – Mark 4:14

A sermon outline by Francis Dewar

An invitation

Thomas Merton describes a summer dawn in the valley where his monastery was set. When they rise for the night office at 2.15am there is no sound except in the monastery. By 3am there are the first stirrings of the birds in the valley.

He writes: “The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the point vierge of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. They begin to speak to Him, not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the point vierge. Their condition asks if it is time for them to “be”. He answers “yes”. Then they one by one wake up and become birds. They manifest themselves as birds, beginning to sing. Presently they will be fully themselves, and will even fly”…

“All wisdom” he writes, “seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point… the virgin point between darkness and light, between non-being and being.”

(Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander p.128)

Your song

The invitation to sing is a metaphor of God’s invitation to every human being. We live in what the TV playwright, Dennis Potter, called the karaoke society, where the majority feel they have to dance to someone else’s tune, to sing someone else’s song.

But God invites you also to sing a song for others that is your own, unique to you, where, so to speak, the words are your words and the music is your own composition.
God’s word to you

In the parable of the sower, the sower sows the word. It is not some general pronouncement of universal application. It is God’s word to you, uniquely and personally, his personal invitation to you to live and to be fruitful for others in some specific way.

The old word for that is ‘vocation’. But that much misused word long ago became narrowed to mean ‘profession’. Then it was devalued to mean ‘a good paid job’. Finally it has been debased to mean that slot of wage-slave existence which people occupy between 9 and 5.

In ordinary use the word vocation has become drained of red blood, purged of passion, and emptied of God. Even in the Church it has become narrowed to mean the ordained ministry or the religious life.

The search can be long and the answer unexpected

How do you go about discerning what God’s personal invitation to you might be? Before answering that question, there are two cautionary points to make. The first is that the search can be long, spread over decades even. Part of the reason for this is the karaoke nature of society, where the expectation is that there will be a ready-made slot for you to occupy. There isn’t. You make your own.

Responding to God’s personal calling to you isn’t about filling a pre-existent slot. It will be something you do that isn’t in any job spec.; or if it is, what you do will be beyond what the job spec requires, and sooner or later it will probably get you into hot water, because it will be non-standard; it may threaten other people’s egos and ‘upset the applecart’.

What sort of God is calling?

The second caution concerns the nature of God. For it is God who calls and a person’s idea of what God is like may severely restrict the kinds of things they expect him to call them to do. Most people’s notion of God is defective. Some seriously so. Some, for example, should never be exhorted to pray because their conception of God is so distorted.

By the same token, some should be discouraged from listening for God’s invitation to them, because it won’t be God they’re listening to, but an inner policeman, or headteacher, or critical parent, or ecclesiastical bigot. The true God is compassionate to all, the source of all creativity, the goal of all longing, concerned with all of life (not just churchly things), and will draw you out beyond anything you think you are remotely capable of – if you let him.
How do you set about listening?

There are many ways to listen, many strands in the discernment of personal vocation. A fruitful place to start might be to reflect on the question ‘What is your passion?’

Have you discovered what you are passionate about? Maybe not yet; but let that question ‘What is your passion?’ lie around in your mind. I’m not of course referring to your current romantic relationship! And it’s not just a question of your latest enthusiasm. Enthusiasms come and go. But if you are genuinely passionate about something it will connect with your depths. Your passion may not be related to God’s call to you; but his call will in some way be related to something you are passionate about.

What are you passionate about?

Mary’s passion was for gardening. Eventually that led to her standing as a Green Party candidate in a local election (to read about how the one circuitously led to the other see my Called or Collared, 2nd ed. p.46-7). Robert’s was for music. He was a very able musician, who moved house to a run-down ex-mining district so as to be able to offer music lessons to kids who would never have thought of the idea and couldn’t have afforded them anyway.

Opening yourself to the calling of God means being open to the possibility that something that you are passionate about could perhaps be a gift in some way to others.

Things that may divert and seduce you

In the parable of the sower Jesus listed some of the things that will pull you aside – the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, the desire of other things (like status, or security, or popularity).

The parable of the sower was taken from Jesus’ own experience. In his temptations in the desert, he felt the power of the things that would pull him aside, divert him from his bliss, and block his response to God’s call. That time in the desert was the necessary prelude to his wholehearted and passionate giving of himself in the story-telling, teaching and healing of the first years of his ministry.

Do the word

"Jesus’ mother and brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you’. But he said to them, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it’ ”. (Luke 8:19-21)