



Parables of Jesus

The Sower

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Genesis 4: 1–8 Mark 4: 1–9

Sermons come in different shapes and sizes. Mine are normally arguments. But this evening my sermon is more by way of a meditation – for the scriptures are best approached meditatively, which is to say they are best approached time and again, from different directions, and not with a view to the take home message – scriptures are not TED talks – but with a view to imaginatively inhabiting the world they conceive and offer to us. So, let us mediate on the parable with the help of three pictures, looked at first separately and in turn, and then together.

I Brueghel¹

Matthew, Mark and Luke record that Jesus teaches from a boat on a single occasion. Mark and Matthew tell us that what he teaches on this occasion is the parable of the sower. Now a picture cannot very well represent the precise content of anyone's teaching and yet Brueghel's depiction rather effectively tells the story of the parable.

We look down towards the harbour from a vantage point which yields a vast panoramic perspective reaching to far distant mountains on the horizon. The colours of the picture work to suggest great depth, receding from strongly defined darker forms in the foreground, to fainter contours in softer greens and blues in the background. The effect of this vantage point and this perspective is to provide not so much landscapes as dramatic and mysterious 'worldscapes', monumental vistas which take in entire regions in a way no human eye ever could.

These worldscapes allow, however, not only a panorama of the natural terrain, but also of the human activity it contains. And what human activity can we see? Well on the one hand we can make out Christ (just visible in the boat at the centre, a small point of brighter light) addressing a considerable crowd, pressing to the very shore-line to hear him. The crowd's eagerness does not surprise us, since the very reason Christ asks the disciples to provide a boat (Mark 3.9), is just to avoid the crush of those enthusiastically flocking to hear and see him. But, on the other hand, we also see, and perhaps more obviously, a busy, bustling and absorbing fish market, of the kind Brueghel depicted as a subject in its own right on other occasions. Laid out in baskets and on the ground is a great variety of fishes, as various as the people who frequent the market (merchants, stallholders, children, beggars, finely

¹ [Jan Brueghel the Elder \(1568–1625\), *Harbour Scene with Christ Preaching*, 1598, Alte Pinakothek, Munich](#)

dressed browsers and more serious shoppers), all of whom Christ, the fisher of men, seeks to draw to himself.

And it is our seeing these two crowds side by side – those caught by Christ’s words, and those attending to the matter of buying a fish – which allows Brueghel to effectively display the burden of the parable, for the parable tells not only of Christ’s word being heard and taken up, but also of its failing to grow and bear fruit, as Satan, persecution and ‘the cares of this world’ prevent the seed from coming to harvest. An eager crowd listens, to be sure – and at the moment that crowd seems larger than the number who are intent on choosing a fish; but in the wider perspective of this worldscape, Christ is small and difficult to pick out and his word is in competition with the noise of the world, with the busyness and business of the market, which threaten to drown out the voice of Christ.

II Van Gogh²

Van Gogh was obsessed with the image of the sower, returning to it time and again. He greatly revered Millet’s celebrated treatment of the subject – an early sketch for which is on this term’s chapel card – and he copied Millet’s bold and confident figure on many occasions. But while he thought that Millet captured something of the grandeur of the very act of sowing, and indeed something of its sacred quality, Van Gogh also thought he could make something else and more of the theme, while finding it hard to achieve what he aimed at. This picture, painted in late November 1888, worked out first of all on a smaller canvas, and stylistically owing much to Van Gogh’s enthusiasm for Japanese prints, he judged a success – it was, he said, ‘a canvas that makes a picture’, and contrary to his normal practice, he signed it in the lower right hand corner.

In the very foreground a deeply shadowed sower in deepest darkest blue works under a vivid yellow-green sky with pink clouds and a large lemon sun, over a violet earth. Van Gogh’s sower has none of the confidence, almost swagger, of Millet’s figure, and yet the intense, incandescent colours are meant to communicate the intensity of the moment, as the sower, with the sun forming a halo behind his head, bends to his holy task. From his right hand the sower broadcasts seed on the rough (heavily impastoed) ground, and approaches a tree which, bending and twisting like the sower, sharply divides the canvas in two.

The tree leads us into the picture, providing some scale and depth, and also some visual relief from the wearying extent of ground over which the sower has to tread, reaching away to the long and low horizon. More importantly, however, the tree speaks of the aching mix of pathos and consolation which Van Gogh found in this motif. For just as the tree sharply divides the canvas, so the seed will be divided, falling into either good soil to live and bear fruit, or falling into bad soil, or to be choked by weeds, and die.

III Hopper³

In many of Edward Hopper’s paintings, as here, it is as if a curtain has gone up at the opening of a play. The scene which is revealed in these paintings is typically heavy with a certain tense silence, which in a play would be explained and perhaps resolved, but in a painting is destined to remain a mystery. But scenes are rendered more mysterious in another way – for all inessential elements have been stripped away and we are left with images which have the clarity (but lack of precise detail) of a childhood memory or a dream.

² [Vincent Van Gogh \(1853–90\), *The Sower*, 1888, Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection, Zurich](#)

³ [Edward Hopper \(1882–1967\), *Automat*, 1926–7, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa](#)

So Hopper's pictures, like dreams – or parables – invite speculation and interpretation. A clue is provided by the title which identifies the setting for the picture as an automat – according to the OED a word 'now chiefly *hist.*' and naming a vending machine or a café in which food was obtained from such machines. Chains of automats flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, especially in New York where Hopper worked, and in the picture a well-dressed and attractive young woman sits alone at a table in just such an establishment, dressed against the cold with fur trimmed coat and gloves. A glove remains on her hand, as if she feels chilled even inside this establishment. She has eaten whatever modest item of food was on the very small plate before her and she finishes her drink – which presumably, along with that radiator by the door, provides some comfort from the cold.

Reflections of the restaurant's bright and somewhat harsh lights are prominent above her head. Below them she is lost in her own reflections, which seem not to be happy ones and perhaps lead nowhere – like the reflections above her head which point us to the utter darkness outside, where, ominously there is no hint of light or life. And perhaps just as ominously – or at least, mysteriously – while she reflects she is not herself reflected – the pane of glass which registers the lights, does not register her. It is as if she is, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

A colourful bowl of fruit sits rather incongruously behind her, and it sits there bearing all of fruit's symbolic weight. Traditionally in a picture fruit suggests temptation, but in this rather desolate automat where one must serve oneself, the fruit, being out of her sight, seems to point up temptation's dreary absence. And perhaps the young woman fears, in this rather forlorn and sterile place, that fruitfulness does indeed lie behind her – and she sits in an oppressive silence, in which a great weight of loneliness and sadness is almost palpable.

In Christ's parable fruit is what is born of seed which falls into good soil, and the seed is the word. Where there is no fruit, the word – the seed – has failed and there is, presumably, only silence. Hopper's young woman sits in a bleak, lonely, desolate place where no word is heard.

IV Now let's take the pictures together.

What does it mean for the word to be heard? What is the word which Christ declares? What is the great harvest to which the sowing of the word is directed?

It is striking that in Mark's Gospel, Christ's first extended body of teaching is a parable about a sower, for the sower is a revolutionary figure standing at the dawn of human history. At some time in humankind's childhood, the sowing of seed allowed agrarian societies to displace hunter gatherer communities. The seed's fruitfulness, yielding thirty, sixty, or (rather more rarely) a hundred fold, made that transition possible. Yet that switch was fateful, for once land was settled and farmed, holding it, and holding on to it, became an ambition and a source of contention, so that the sociality which agrarianism facilitated was at the same time blighted by conflict and violence. In the first few chapters of Genesis, when the human story is only just getting under way, we read that Cain (the farmer) murdered Abel his brother (the keeper of sheep). Well a keeper of sheep is not a hunter gatherer, but the often nomadic existence of those whose flocks range across vast territories is quite as likely at odds with the ambitions of land grabbing farmers as was the life of hunter gatherers. So the primeval sower sows not only seed, but discord.

The later sower, the sower of the parable, intends something else with the sowing of the seed, not discord. But what does he intend?

We might attend a little more to the setting for Christ's teaching of this parable – it is of course ironic that Christ is obliged by the enthusiastic press of the crowds to take to a boat, only to deliver a parable which reflects on the failure of his word to find a proper hearing. But there is also something else worth noting about the setting – for if one imagines hearing this parable as from the place of someone in the crowd, Christ's location in a boat provides a telling back drop to his teaching. Behind his head we can imagine not a halo, but one of those perfect horizons where sky and sea, heaven and earth, meet.

Now in his very first words in Mark's Gospel, even before he delivers this parable, Jesus spoke of the coming of the kingdom, or kingship, of God – and thus proclaimed just such a perfect meeting of heaven and earth. And he proclaimed this meeting of heaven and earth for the very reason that the earth has lost sight of this horizon. The earthly sower has his sights set firmly below the horizon. The farmer is intent on the ground – the ground he must have and hold, even at the cost of turning away from his brother. He must have his harvest, even if that harvest is bought at the cost being for himself, being for himself against the other – even at the cost of being without his brother. Let Hopper's troubled figure, in the deathly and joyless silence of the automat, stand for the lonely sterility and barrenness to which that path leads. It is only as the earthly man looks up – only as he is prompted by God's word, by Christ's word to raise his eyes – that he sees the horizon and what lies above it, only as he looks up that he may repent of the conflict and violence which is the harvest of the human sowing of seed. Only with the coming of God's kingdom, the coming of God's rule, will there be a different sowing, and a plentiful harvest of justice and peace and joy.

In the regular work of a perfectly regular sower, Van Gogh found grandeur and poignancy, for the annual sowing of seed is a labour of faith promising renewal and new life. The regular sower, the sower who for centuries has broadcast seemingly dead seed in humble faith on to the blank ground, looks forward in hope for growth, renewal and fruitfulness, even while he knows that if the earth does not receive his seed it will not bear fruit but die. But the work of the sower as Christ conceived it is grandeur, yet – and just as Brueghel's great panorama of the harbour in which Christ's boat is berthed and the landscape and mountains beyond, gives his teaching an epic context, no mere landscape but a world-scape – so Van Gogh, a great inhabitant of the biblical world, finds in the sower not just the grandeur of the annual round, but something altogether more poignant and epic. Van Gogh sees Christ himself in his sower, and Christ's word in the seed, and he remembers as he envisions the scene that Christ the sower envisioned a new and better harvest, and laboured till the end of the day, until like the seed, he was laid dead in the ground. This sower, like the seed, goes down into the earth, for the sake of a fruitfulness which will overcome the deathly wishes of the world.

Van Gogh's tree is heavily pollarded, and at certain times of year might itself seem dead, like the seed. Yet from its wounds, fresh blossom springs, holding over the sower's lowered and haloed head a sign of promise, hope and joy – even as the light of the setting sun fades.