

This past week, I have found myself firmly in the presence of the homeless again. Around our church, like many of you, I have encountered a number of new faces who seek refuge each night around this building, and it has been an important and inspiring few days getting to know some of our new neighbours, and to be reminded of how homelessness is not a simple, straightforward issue.

On Wednesday of last week, Joy, my work experience student from St Marylebone School, and I, spent most of the day with Hinde Street Methodist Church. And one story we heard, from a colleague at the West London Mission, was of a man who had become homeless, because he became so frustrated and fearful about the stress of his job, maintaining his home, and the pressure of his financial situation, that he broke down, threw his house keys into the drain, and spent the next three months walking the streets of London. Homelessness, I was quickly reminded, comes in many forms, and is caused by many different elements. And the response is not to pass judgment, but to realise how the man who throws his keys into the gutter, could be any one of us. I wonder if you've ever felt like that man. I wonder how close you have ever come to throwing your keys in the face of your problems. I can safely say that I've come too close, maybe more times than I care to remember. And that's the thing about homelessness, it's not just the person sleeping on the church steps, it's all of us, in all the myriad ways we encounter the most dreaded word of all - isolation.

Whether you're a student sitting your final exams, a musician rehearsing for a solo performance, a writer preparing a significant report or article, an actor using a method to enter into the life of a character; you could be applying for a new job, taking on a new hobby, or maybe taking on a new journey which will bring about significant change in your life. Or you could even be filing your tax return. Despite their seriousness, it's often not the tasks in themselves which make us stressed, it's the fear of what will happen to us if they don't work out. And that fear is often a fear of standing alone, no one else to surround or support you, facing the music, the responsibility, on your own. That's isolation. And that's why no one really can ever do anything on their own, and why the word isolation has to be answered with the word redemption. How might that work?

This morning, we heard two very distinct passages of scripture. First, we heard the prophet Isaiah, opening up for us, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful images we find of redemption in the Bible. "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." It's a beautiful image, like the rain, the evaporation, condensation and the whole cycle of how rain and snow fall and water the earth; in the same way the Word of God is sent into the world, and that is the way we share that Word with one another. The Word is sent, it waters, grows, nourishes and redeems creation, and then, and only then, does it return to God. Like the sheep of the field, even when only one is lost, the Word does not return until everyone is accounted for. And again, that is how the prophet not only understands the work of God, but that is how we send forth the Word in our own lives. If you want a picture of redemption, I think this is a particularly obvious and beautiful one. But it's interesting how often this is overlooked.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of Matthew, and here we find another well known image of God's Word being sown and redeeming the earth. In the parable of the sower, Jesus tells of a man who goes out to sow the seeds of the harvest. Some seeds fall on the path and birds come and eat them straightaway. Some fall on rocky ground where the

shoots sprout up quickly, but, having no foundation or root, they quickly become scorched by the sun and wither away. Some seeds fall into the thorns which choke them and prevent them growing. But some fall on the good soil, where they have a foundation, nourishment and the conditions with which to grow into a plentiful harvest.

As Jesus goes on to explain, this how the Word of God grows in our lifetime. The seeds on the path are like those who do not hear God's Word, and so, exposed and vulnerable, the evil one comes and snatches them away. The seeds on the rocky ground are like those who hear the Word, and begin enthusiastically and openly with joy, but having no root, eventually the cares and persecutions of the world trouble them and they cannot withstand them, and the faith disappears. The seeds in the thorns, similarly, are like those for whom the cares of the world become too much and the faith is choked away. But the good soil is where faith can grow, where it is received with joy, heard and understood, and it grows and grows into the Kingdom of God.

It may sound like a funny thing to say about the Gospel, but I wonder what strikes you as problematic about this passage. One of the things many preachers, ministers and priests have to deal with, is often the task of repairing the damage caused to so many by harsh preaching, extremist religion, and judgmental uses of scripture. It might come as a surprise, that for so many, the parable of the sower has become, not an inspirational image of redemption, but an accusatory tool used to single out people into a deeper isolation than they started with. Without sounding accusatory myself, over the years, I've heard many Christians use this passage as a way of making out that the good soil applies to them, and that thank God they don't ever find themselves walking among the rocks and thorns and hard paths themselves.

One of the things that continues to take me by surprise, perhaps in my own naïveté, and especially upon moving to London, and which came out again in my visit to the West London Mission this week, is how generally difficult it is, and actually how I've probably never been able to walk on the good soil. Pretty much every turn in our lives, even when we think we're on good terms, is rocky ground; a series of close calls, concerns, troubles, tasks. Or it could be thorns, the dark, difficult and spiky encounters we're all familiar with. Or it could even be a smooth, wide open, though hard path, which seems plain sailing at first, but could so easily and so soon become a downfall. And then you find yourself standing on your door step, with your keys in your hand, and the drain is just beneath your feet. And then you realise that we're all in the same neighbourhood, and we're all living in isolation from one another.

I'm not saying that the countryside is any better mind you... It's just as rocky and thorny out there, just in a different way. But this is the context in which our faith develops and grows, and our response is not to pretend we're on the good soil, or to think most of us have the answers and some others simply need to be given them. It's about realising that we share these paths together, that the same redeemable and redeeming vulnerability is with all of us, and what's more, that God goes there with us. Jesus states clearly what conditions we need to grow, but he doesn't end it there. It's pretty clear also that Jesus and His disciples didn't exactly spend all their time in comfort either. And for us, as disciples today, we are called to embrace that same in-between space, knowing that, as people in need of healing, it is only together, openly, mutually, forgivingly, that we recognise our pathway as one that is shared, and no matter how much that hurts at first, it soon becomes the way to move from isolation to redemption.

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth... My word shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." As we share the Word of God and live in His life, like the very Word of God, we don't end in the thorns, the rocks or the smoothest path, or even the soil, we end with Him, which is where we begin and we never leave and He, His Word, never leaves us until "it shall accomplish His purpose and succeed in the thing for which He and we are all sent."