

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

About a fortnight ago, I suddenly noticed that on my neighbour's hydrangea bush, the flower heads are a mix of different colours. I hadn't noticed this before so I asked my green-fingered aunt 'how?' and she told me that it's something to do with the sulphur in the soil. The following week I find myself visiting a parishioner whose garden also has hydrangea bushes of different colours – 'oh yes,' she explained 'you can add sulphur or lime to the soil, depending on how pink or blue you want them – but if the soil is PH neutral then both colours will grow together'. I had no idea that you could adjust the soil in order to affect the colour of the bushes, I've always thought they just grew and you had to like it or lump it.

I was reminded of this newfound fact as I read this week's readings. At first the parable of the sower seems to be about circumstantial seed conditions, but it could also be asking us about our hydrangeas. *How does your garden grow?* Goes the nursery rhyme, and Jesus is almost asking '*How does the garden of your soul grow*'. Are you satisfied with the colour of your flowers, the shape of your plants, or would you like them to have deeper hues and to be even stronger?

Now, as rich as it is, I'm not going to preach on the parable of the sower this morning, because, I'm actually rather delighted that we have been given a reading from the Book of Isaiah.... and it's not even Christmas! ;)

The Book of Isaiah! Stuffed full of songs, of sayings, of stories.

Sometimes called the fifth Gospel because it's so often quoted by Christ, and yet also deemed one of the most important books of the Old Testament, because scholars are certain that the people of God have been using it in prayer, worship, and study for nearly three thousand years. This is a book stuffed full of truths about our faith and the God we all believe in.

The book of Isaiah is also a work of poetic and literary genius. It uses language, and images, and metaphors which seek not to create a rational explanation of the faith, but to engage the poetic imagination and the visual cortexes. Collected together over a long period of time the whole book of Isaiah – the 66 chapters - offer to us the prophetic genre known as the 'Oracles' or the 'Divine Utterances', also known as 'the words spoken by God'.

The real beauty and genius in the Book of Isaiah lies in the fact that the oracles are notoriously difficult to define to a singular meaning. The ambiguity, the allusions and the allegorical nature ensures that the meaning of the text is always born out of the context in which it is being read. You and I can read the text on one day, but it may well reveal something different when we read it on another day, which in itself tells us how God is a dynamic involved being, who is daily responsive to person and context.

Today, we have had chapter 55, which is all about the 'Word of God' – a divine utterance about the divine utterance, overall.

In the New Testament the divine utterances are given a special Greek name – they are known as the 'Rhema' and this title tells us that these words are not just read with the eyes or heard by the ears, but are received in the heart. The word of God, as described in our Isaiah reading – and indeed as described in our Gospel reading – seeks to describe divine utterances into the hearts of all the people.

And from Isaiah we learn three things about the Rhema;

First, the word of God speaks into the cycle of nature, with the rising and the falling, the ebb and the flow of our lives and our world. It was the divine utterance that brought all into being and remains there sustaining and creating, until it is time to return home. The Rhema is wedded to the very nuts and bolts of creation – watering and feeding – and He speaks into the very mechanics of our hearts and lives.

Secondly we are told that the Word of God brings change. It brings life and joy into seemingly inanimate or mundane things. The Rhema causes the distant mountains and the static trees to clap their hands and sing. With the divine utterance, our own heavy hearts can instead go out in joy and be led back in peace.

And thirdly, we are told most crucially of all perhaps, that the prickliest and most overgrown of thorns and briars will be replaced with the lush evergreens of fir, and the fruit-bearing shrubs of myrtle, when the word of God gets involved. The Rhema doesn't shy away from the bramble bush of our hearts – with their thorns of fear and hurt, of mistakes and regret. He goes in, with hope and redemption, with life and with transformation. Isaiah, shows that if the garden of our heart is ever struggling, the green-fingered word of God is ready to pull on his gloves and get to work.

But this can all sound a bit invasive. Does God just stomp around in wellies trampling on our gardens and pulling up brambles willy-nilly? For some of us that might be welcomed, but others of us will find ourselves fast locking the gate at the very prospect.

And this is where whoever set the readings for today – the writers of the lectionary – have sold us slightly short.

The Isaiah reading began this morning at verse 10, which means that nine verses have been left out. Let me read some of them to you now.

'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! ... Incline your ear, and come to me; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.'

The opening of Isaiah chapter 55 is an invitation to receive the word of God. 'Come', 'Listen', 'Seek', there's no stumping here - the Rhema – the divine utterance of God – is inviting. No 'should-dos', but 'would-yous'. I so wish that the church as a whole were better at hearing and conveying the personal warmth and keen-ness of this invitation.

Because it is exactly what we hear from the person of Jesus Christ, rightly described as 'The Word of God Incarnate'. He invites people with the words 'Come, See, Seek, Listen, Follow'. He personally invites them to open their hearts and then leads them into a flourishing life.

Rhema-tos Christou is the Greek term to describe the divine utterances of Jesus Christ. And when we take the message of Isaiah alongside the ministry of Christ, we see God's timeless intention and His faithful desire for all people to 'come' to 'seek' and to 'listen'. [The Eucharist is no different, it is His present day divine utterance – to come, eat, be fed.]

The word of God can come in many ways, entering hearts and enriching lives, comforting and nurturing us in all that we face ... making the seeds grow strong enough to bear the bad weather, making the flowers blossom into their deepest hues, watering and feeding so that the garden bears fruit for others.

But it always begins with re-accepting that invitation. To come, to seek, to listen, and to ask ourselves, regularly, how does our Garden grow?