

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 5 | 05.07.2020**

Isaiah 55: 10-13; Romans 8: 1-11; St Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

**I know that lots of people are complaining about the numbers of repeats on terrestrial TV at the moment but I was pleased to come across another of Louis Theroux's interesting fly on the wall documentaries, even though it was eight years old.**

**Louis works largely in the US and his particular niche is to try to see, from the inside, how people cope with living in very difficult circumstances. While his programmes on those on death-row have regularly hit the headlines, this particular episode was a study on autism, both the young people suffering from it and the families who cope with children with often severe behavioural conditions.**

**Watching even a few minutes of what served as 'normal family life' was deeply distressing. How else could one respond to the mother of autistic twins who spoke about the painful lack of emotional response she gets from her daughters who spend most of their time blanking her out of their lives. *All I can do, she said, is to try to make them happy, but I don't get anything back. It took them five years to even call me Mom.***

**The Gospel set for today, the famous story of the Sower, firmly sets the problem of growth with the recipients of the Word of God. They are likened to hard-baked, barren soil; to soil thinly spread among rock; to soil overgrown with weeds – and finally to good soil where the seed grows well.**

**And this has been understood to reflect the unqualified generosity of God and the rather less receptive nature of those with whom God shares his gifts.**

**But I wonder what the story looks feels like to those who, for whatever reason, fail to hear to hear the message as the good news that it really is.**

**One of the elements of Louis Theroux's documentary was an attempt to understand what autism radically changes in the brain. Part of it was clearly a difficulty is relating to other people; in others it was extraordinarily obsessive talents in one area – to the total exclusion of almost everything else in life.**

The work of the teachers and trainers in the various educational environments Louis visited, was to see if there were ways of communicating which would 'fit' the world view of their students. With infinite patience they worked at trying to build mechanisms for relating to the rest of society for those who didn't seem to be at all interested in others. And we saw at least glimpses of where that had proved successful.

At this moment, in the wake of the Coronavirus, when the future looks so uncertain, when any kind of risk taking seems too much to take on because we are so concerned with how this will all play out for us, what chance is there that the seed that the Church has to sow "generously, unsparingly" is actually going to be useful unless it is sown in ways that others can take up readily – by those with little time, those already over stretched and over stressed, those perhaps more concerned with material comfort than with structural change for the whole community? Why should we, as someone said to me last week, be concerned with caring for others when the world is so unfair?

In a two hour webinar sponsored by Church House Publishing last Thursday teatime, a number of leading Church people spoke on the theme 'what will life be like after the pandemic?' And one couldn't fault their analysis of where we are and what is needed in the future. They touched on everything from the need for job retention schemes to the place of women with dependent children, the need for trust and a general reassessment of what is 'expensive', of the way the arts are able to shift our perspectives and for the divide between rich and poor to be radically reduced. They looked at 'building back better' and the long-term dangers of youth unemployment. There was nothing wrong with the seed.

But as always the crunch lies is how we make these insights tell in the society in which we live? How can we blame the world for not listening; the crisis hardly makes for easy conversations? And we all have an aversion (like those autistic children) to being told that we are not doing things right!

Louis' questions don't pull any punches. To one couple who were clearly finding their autistic son really draining, he asked *Do you love him any less because of how he behaves?*

**The question was too much for the father who left the room. But when the parents came back together again, they shared two thoughts. The first was that of course they didn't love him any the less even though the physical demands were really hard to cope with. The second was that they couldn't help thinking about the hopes that they had had for him when he was born – that he would grow to be a doctor or a lawyer and have his own family. Now they had readjusted to the new reality and would be happy if he could find anything that would allow him some independence. And they would always be there for him whatever happened.**

**The parable of the Sower can sound very black and white; there is a golden trophy for those who flourish in the good soil. There is nothing for those who inhabit the hard, the rocky and the weed infested parts of the community.**

**In the post-Corona world, I have a feeling this parable has a great deal to say about holding out our (socially distanced) hands to each and every one of those categories, to recognise that the future may not be quite what any of us hoped for, but that an abiding solidarity with those are suffering most (of the sort that Louis Theroux shows) is where we need to be – praying too for all those who have big decisions to make in this new and uncertain landscape – and working as hard as we can on learning the ever-changing languages in which the Gospel needs to be to be shared today.**