



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (12th July) 2026

The scheduled speaker at the clergy conference last week was delayed in the States by storms on the East Coast. In her place for the second session of the first day we had the Dean, who did a pretty accomplished job at stepping in at the last moment - not least by being very entertaining. Understandably, he opted for a short introduction followed by group discussions.

One of the subjects up for discussion was what we hoped to achieve in the years ahead. On the table where I had found a roost, there was much talk about USPs - which I had to interpret for another cleric from our deanery - and target demographics.

What seemed to be absent from the perceptions of some of the participants in the discussion was that if you fashion your character closely around a particular constituency of people is that deliberately or otherwise you embed a degree of discouragement for those who do not belong to that grouping.

The *Parable of the Sower*, which was read as the Gospel this morning, suggests a rather less strategic approach to our mission: scattering the seeds and letting them fall where they will.

In the New Testament the seeds are said to be the Word of God - the Faith that we communicate by word and deed, whilst the different types of ground on which those seeds fall represent the various sorts of people whom that Faith encounters. However, we can invert that analysis, understanding the seeds as people seeking a Faith and a context in which to practice it and the different types of ground standing for the various sorts of congregations, which they might meet.

First, there is the path: a Christian community, which is simply unwelcoming. I suspect that there are few of these nowadays in an outright sense; but there is a danger that newcomers find an established group of people turned in on themselves and whilst not hostile to others, seem - at least - not very interested in them; and they melt away as quickly as they came. However, we need to be careful here: some will leave, because they do not find that for which they are looking and in some cases a Christian community is not or should not be the place where they will.

Then, there is the shallow soil. This situation, perhaps, is characterised by a tendency to rush ahead with things - not to get to know people - and not giving them time to settle in - before trying to introduce them to developed participation in the life of the congregation. Sometimes - though not always - this can be a particular temptation in the cases of a preferred demographic. It can also represent a yielding to an impatience on the part of the newcomer "to get involved," as it is sometimes phrased. The problem is that it is all too quick and there is no root, no foundation to their participation in the life of the Church.

Perhaps the most complex is the issue of the thorns, which we might construe as the degree to which we seek to establish and maintain a common identity of Faith and practice. In short, if we are too prescriptive with newly arrived people, we risk strangling the life out of incipient Faith; but insufficient commonality produces a chaotic and incoherent community about which little is shared beyond being in the same place at the same time.

Finally, of course, there is the good soil - those places where new Faith finds the right nurture and is able to grow: places - or maybe more accurately, instances - where Faith finds the right nurture. I doubt that there is anywhere, which gets it right every time; and most congregations probably exhibit elements of all four categories - as we might infer from the parable.