

'Whatever method was used for sowing the corn – broadcasting, dibbling or drilling – the care taken was considerable, as the result of sowing is only too plainly visible and remains so for months after the corn has come up. The broadcast sowing of seed, contrary to general opinion, was a particularly skilled job, especially if the sower was using both hands. A farmer was lucky if he had a man on his farm who could sow with both hands as it required an accurate synchronization of hand and foot: if a man missed his step and altered his rhythm his sowing would be immediately affected: there would be 'missing bits'. These, in addition to being a lasting witness to a lapse in his skill, were also considered a bad omen in some districts of East Anglia...'

(p.140 The Pattern under the Plough)

This is to take only one aspect of a complex process; George Ewart Evans also explores the preparation of the land, the type of seed and the harvest itself in his search for the underlying superstitions which often accompanied each part of the process, or did, in days gone by. The teller of the parable in today's gospel has a more obvious purpose – for those 'in the know'. The addition of the detailed explanation is probably a later insertion as it is unusual in the telling of parables elsewhere. The writer is spelling it out for all and this is useful for those of us now divorced from working the land by the sweat of the brow, under the immediate curse that is of Adam's punishment (Gn 3:17-19). In the time of Jesus his audience would have readily grasped the pattern on the surface, if not below. So the length of the gospel passage is largely about the reception of the seed rather than its sowing, for if God is the sower then there will be no missed steps,

Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth... so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.

This is God's care not only for us but for the whole of creation, read at one level as giving life in all its wonder and variety on this otherwise barren planet, but also giving life to life itself, that is, giving it its meaning '*groaning in one great act of giving birth*', giving voice to God's glory. In one sense the parable begins with the physical and remains with the physical because the word of God has to be heard and acted on to be effective. This is where we become God's hands and feet as well as the soil containing the seed. But as for the harvest, that remains firmly within God's hands. In Ireland there was a belief that Friday was a good day for sowing without the use of iron, and in East Anglia, if the husbandman had done his work properly he could expect the barley 'to be up in three days'. Now there's a parable in the making.

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