



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 12 July by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.

Sowing, Soil, Growth and Dragons

Today we are confronted by the Parable of the Sower. Now parables are interesting things; the fundamental principle is that we do not interpret parables so much as parables interpret us. They refuse to sit quietly on the page. Instead, they turn towards us and ask uncomfortable questions. They reveal truths about ourselves that we might otherwise prefer not to see.

In the parable before us, the focus appears to be upon the soil. The sower scatters seed with almost reckless generosity, without calculation or discrimination. Some falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, some on good soil. And yet Jesus is not really describing agriculture, but human hearts.

Perhaps we might understand those hearts today through the language of dragons. That theme feels especially relevant here at Wells Cathedral as we celebrate our exhibition of mythical creatures. At first sight, you may think they are merely decorative or playful. Yet these images come from a 1650 text in our library, which we are wanting people who might not usually come to the Cathedral to be able to explore. And they remind us that cathedrals have long understood these creatures are not primarily about fantasy; they are about the landscape of the human soul and they ask us deep questions about truth. They are visual parables, helping us see what Jesus often taught through stories.

For centuries, churches have filled their carvings, manuscripts and misericords with dragons and strange beasts because they express realities that ordinary language struggles to capture. In much the same way, the Parable of the Sower is not really about farming, but what happens beneath the surface of our lives. So, the dragon remind us of the rocky places, the thorny places and the hardened paths within us all—the fears, distractions, anxieties and resistances that can prevent the seed of God's word from taking root.

These creatures belong in a cathedral because a cathedral is concerned with cultivation as much as construction, and with the ultimate questions of truth and faith. Faith is not simply about outward behaviour; it is about the condition of the soil within. Jesus invites us to look beneath the surface and ask deeper questions. What has frightened us and stopped us listening with the ear of our hearts? What thorns are choking us and making us afraid? What is of ultimate value? And what treasures might be waiting to emerge if God were to renew the ground? The dragons of the soul are both obstacles and clues; they resist us, yet often reveal where God most desires to work.

The dragon, in many traditions, guards a treasure. The challenge is not always to slay the dragon but to discover what it is protecting. Sometimes, the very places where we experience resistance, fear or struggle are the places where God most longs to sow new life. The dragon may be standing over the very ground where the kingdom is waiting to grow. And the good news of the Gospel is that Christ is both sower and gardener, patiently working the soil of our hearts until even the most unpromising ground can bear fruit.¹

In much the same way, the different soils of Jesus' parable reveal the dragons of the human heart. The hard path is the soil where the seed cannot penetrate its surface. We all know something of that dragon. It is the dragon of cynicism or the dragon of disappointment. The dragon that says, "I've heard it all before." Life can harden us, and loss can harden us. We can become imprisoned not by walls but by habits of thinking. We stop expecting anything new from God because we have convinced ourselves that growth is impossible.

Then there is the rocky soil. Here the seed springs up quickly but has no depth. At first, everything looks promising, but there is no root system strong enough to sustain life. This dragon is more subtle; it is the dragon of shallowness with a desire for immediate results. The temptation to confuse enthusiasm with discipleship. Many things begin brightly: new resolutions, new commitments, new spiritual practices. But when difficulties come, when faith becomes costly, the roots prove too shallow. But growth requires depth.

Then comes the thorny soil: the seed grows, but so do the thorns and gradually the life is choked away. This may be the dragon most familiar to many of us. This is the dragon of distraction, the dragon of anxiety, the dragon of endless busyness. Jesus tells us that the cares of the world and the lure of wealth crowd out the life of the kingdom. Our worries, our ambitions, our need for approval slowly consume the space where faith might otherwise flourish. As the gardeners

¹ In Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea novels, dragons symbolise truth, self-knowledge and transformation. In one of her works, she writes 'To light a candle is to cast a shadow' recalling us to the deep truth that there is shadow where we find life, maybe even weed where we find growth.

among you will know well, the tragedy is that thorns do not usually appear overnight. They grow gradually, almost unnoticed, until one day we realise that what matters most has been crowded out by what matters less.

Yet the good news of the parable is that Jesus does not leave us trapped with our dragons. For there is another kind of soil: Good soil. And notice that good soil is not perfect soil: it is simply open soil. Receptive soil – a soil that allows itself to be cultivated. For many years, I read this parable as though Jesus were describing different categories of people. Some are rocky soil. Some are thorny soil. Some are fertile soil.

But the longer I live, the less convincing that interpretation becomes. The uncomfortable truth is that all the soils live within every one of us. There are places in my life where I am receptive to God's grace. There are other places that are hard and worn down. Some places are shallow, and some are crowded with thorns. The distance between fruitful soil and rocky ground is often remarkably small.

And perhaps that is where the dragon imagery becomes most illuminating. For the Christian life is not about pretending the dragons are absent. It is about recognising them and naming them. Only then can we understand what they are protecting. Sometimes our resistance points towards a wound that needs healing. Sometimes our fear guards a deeper courage waiting to emerge. Sometimes the obstacle is also the invitation. The dragon may be standing over treasure that God longs to release.²

The extraordinary thing about this parable is that failure is part of the story. Three sowings appear unsuccessful. Yet the sower keeps sowing and the generosity never stops. We cannot know where the seed will land. We cannot predict the harvest. We cannot calculate the outcome. Just as we don't know for those who come to see the dragon in this space, what treasure that might unfurl in their lives, what truth they might discover about God.

Some so you may know CS Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952) which has the story of Eustace Scrubb's transformation into a dragon, after he selfishly took a dragon's treasure and fell asleep on it. He wakes up to find himself transformed into a dragon. This isn't an external monster, but a symbol of selfishness, greed and pride already within Eustace. Later, Eustace describes what happened when Aslan came across him, *'The first tear he made was so deep that I*

² That is why the Church exists not simply to preserve faith but to cultivate soil. The calling of the Christian community is to allow our hardened places to be ploughed up and our rocky places identified and removed. To have the thorns of anxiety and distraction carefully cleared away. Who knows what might grow then?

thought it had gone right into my heart.’ And later, ‘Then he caught hold of me ... and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious ... Then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again.’

Here we discover clear baptismal imagery of rebirth and renewal, of change and transformation. For the dragon revealed what was already there, just as within us there are rocky places, thorny places and hardened paths – all of which reveal something within us. And the dragon in the Cathedral is perhaps a powerful and confronting image of the deep work that God wishes to do within each of us. Genesis tells a similar story. The real struggle is not ultimately between Jacob and Esau but within every human heart. There is fertile soil and thorny soil within us all.

And our task is simply to cultivate the soil of our hearts. For Christ still scatters grace with apparent wastefulness. Christ still calls people by name. Christ still tills hardened ground. Christ still loosens the grip of dragons and releases hidden treasures. And wherever Christ’s word finds even the smallest patch of open soil, the miracle of growth begins. ^{3 4} Amen.

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Dean of Wells

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³ In a 2020 Study by the Pew Centre (June 2025), 76% of people still identified with a religion and in the previous 10 years the number of Christians had grown by 122 million.

⁴ The service in the Cathedral ended with the hymn *Praise my soul the king of heaven:*

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
To his feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like me his praise should sing?
Praise him, Praise him,
Praise the everlasting King.*