

The Virginia Window

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Text: Mark 4.1-20, or Matthew 13.1-23.

“O God our Father, pour upon us the gift of your Holy Spirit. Breathe, move, and inspire written, spoken, and as yet unthought words that we might know your living Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

I want to speak today about the stained-glass windows which were installed in the new Immanuel Chapel at Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA USA. A few years ago, I was amazed to see a video of a truck appearing with new stained-glass windows, in no small part because the Dean, my old friend Ian Markham, is crazy and takes his faith to extreme heights, and so he came up with the idea of building a spectacular new chapel adorned with beautiful artwork.¹

As many of you know, the old chapel at VTS was sadly burned down shortly after Ian became Dean. One of the sacristans was in such a hurry to get to the usual wonderful lunch in the Dining Hall that he didn't properly extinguish the incense burner. Out of the ashes of that tragedy came new life, this amazing chapel with three windows—and I was privileged to be there in 2018 when the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, dedicated them as representations of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

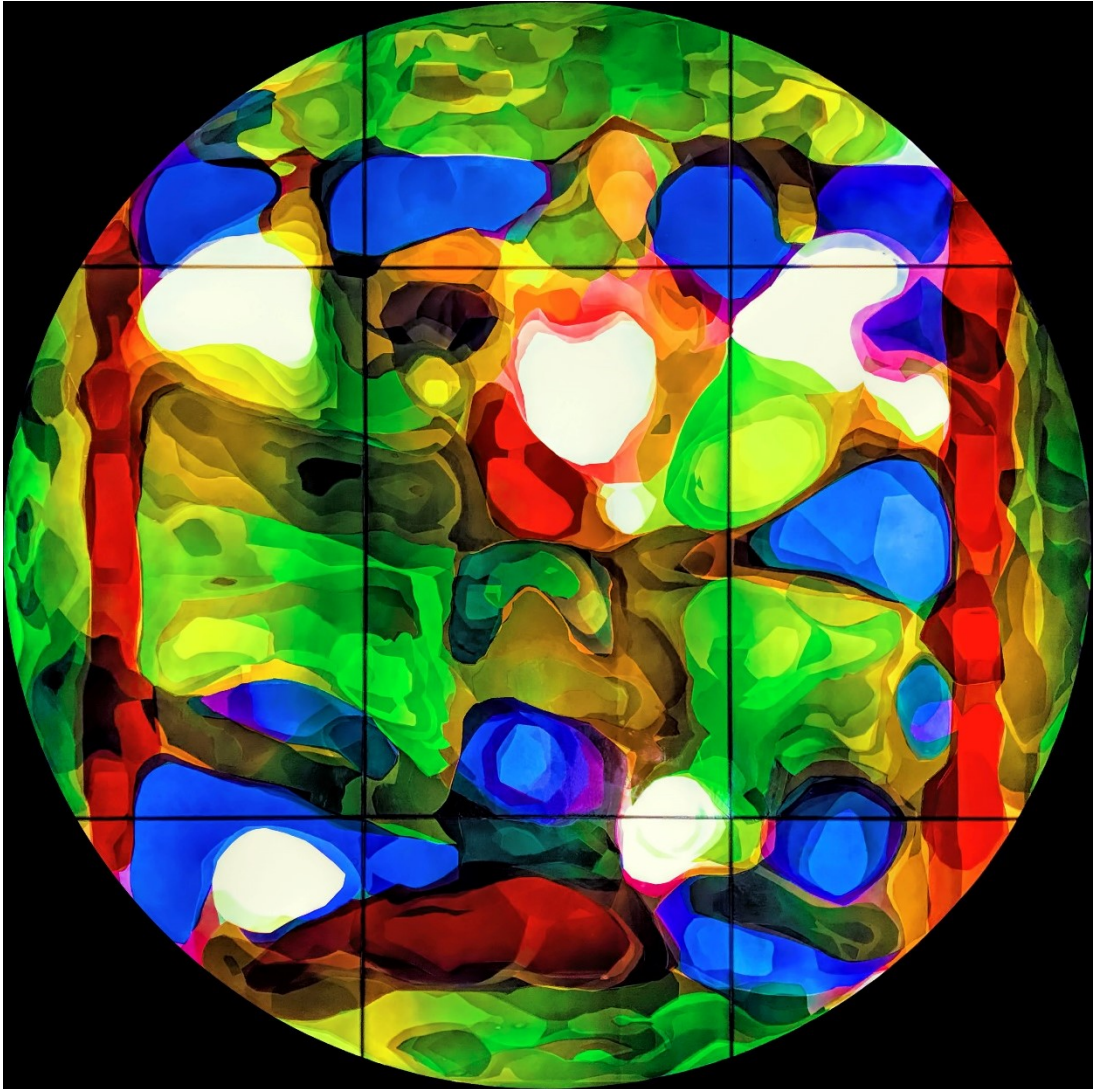
The window of the second Person of the Trinity—on the face of it, just a set of white, green, red, and blue blobs—represents the Parable of the Sower, and is based upon a panel from Canterbury Cathedral of the 12th century. The artist of the VTS window, Brian Clarke, was in Canterbury Cathedral one day while the sunlight was streaming through the mediaeval stained-glass windows in the cathedral, and he took a photograph of the patterns of the sun refracted through the colors of this 12th-century stained-glass on the paving slabs of the cathedral floor. You can see the way in which the areas of color—the white, the green, the

¹ Go to <https://vts.edu/immanuel-chapel/> to watch a video of the delivery and installation of the windows.



"Canterbury Cathedral window n.XV Detail," a photograph by J. Guffogg and J. Hannan showing the twelfth-century Parable of the Sower stained-glass window in Canterbury Cathedral

red, the blue—match onto the original window. For me, the fact that the stained glass window in Virginia Seminary is a bit impressionistic and rather blurred and unclear tells us something about parables. Parables are—by definition—a bit unclear, they always leave us asking: what is this about, and why does Jesus insist on teaching in parables? Certainly, some of his first hearers got very frustrated with him about this: "How long will you keep us in suspense? . . . tell us plainly" (John 10.24).



*"The Sower," a stained-glass window designed by Brian Clark
and fabricated by Derix Glassstudios in Taunusstein-Wehen, Germany.*

The Greek word *parabolē* means something that is, literally, "thrown around." The mathematical term 'parabola' comes also from it, and having been watching lots of Twenty 20 cricket recently, I've seen quite a few balls knocked up into the air and then nobody's quite sure where they might land—or whom they might hit! Mark says that Jesus didn't teach anything to the crowds except in parables. Why? And how are we to interpret them? This parable, we all know, probably the first parable we ever learned in Sunday School, is usually called the Parable of the

Sower. Except that's a really bad title for it, because I don't think that's what it's about. Most of us, I'm sure, have preached about this parable, and last week, our colleague, Dr. Ros Oliver, shared a sermon with us, telling us that the parable is not about the sower—it's about the *soils*. Ros took us through a Sunday school game with children sitting on different seats to represent the different sorts of ground, with them springing up and then withering down, or being choked, and all that kind of thing that children love acting out. It is true that for a long time I have thought of it as the Parable of the **Soils**, rather than the Parable of the Sower.

It is also unusual in that Jesus then explains the parable privately to the disciples who are usually represented as a bit slow on the uptake, or even stupid, especially in Mark's Gospel. So we are given an allegorical explanation, with the seed on the paths and the birds of the air taking it away as the devil removing the word of God. In fact, the Canterbury window represents the path with a sort of red blob at the bottom. It seems to have birds etched in it. Of course, red being the color of the devil, it brings out the whole point of the path—it's there on the path that the devil comes and steals the seed. The window also has various rocks and stones and the seed springing up quickly on the rocks and wilting for lack of roots, and then there are thistles choking the new growths, while running across it all there's the good soil with the thirty-, sixty, and hundred-fold all sprouting out.

The problem is that most scholars think that this explanation is not likely to be originally from the historical Jesus. It's the only parable in Mark that has such a full explanation. And in Matthew's account, the explanation is worked out even more carefully. But the historical Jesus seems to have spoken in parables—and just left them like that. This reflects an argument that took place between J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis in the "Eagle and Child," the Oxford pub famous for its meetings of the Inklings writers' group. Tolkien really wasn't a great fan of Narnia because he didn't like Lewis's use of allegory. But even there, it's quite difficult to work it all out. Okay, Aslan is Jesus. Fair enough. And the leader of the children is called Peter. Well, that fits too. Edmund is at least a decent Anglo-Saxon saint, but who on earth do Susan and Lucy represent? Why didn't he use some decent Biblical female names like Hannah or Rachel or Elizabeth? And when you start pushing Narnia as an allegory, you quickly get into all sorts of trouble. You can probably try and make the wicked Witch into the devil, but in that case, what is Father Christmas doing there? And there are all sorts of problems when you start looking at the enemy, the Calormen, who look remarkably like Saracens with their scimitars and their curly slippers, which seems rather Islamophobic, even racist, to us today.

Actually, Narnia is not an allegory, though it clearly calls for a Christian explanation. Conversely, the one thing that's clear about *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's world is it is simultaneously an incredibly Christian, and indeed for that matter, Roman Catholic world, but it's by no means an allegory. One thing that is completely missing from Middle Earth is religion. We don't get priests and churches or anything in Middle Earth. And yet the whole story is the story of salvation and redemption through self-sacrifice—just think of Gandalf and the Balrog, or Frodo at the 'End of It All' under Mount Doom.

So the literary use of story to make a point is an extremely complex issue, and merely reducing everything to an allegory is problematic. Yes, you *can* do it with the Parable of the Sower. You can also have a go with the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, where the (devil) enemy sows weeds in (God's) field (Matt 13:24-30). But go a little bit further into the parables, and you start running into all sorts of trouble. For instance, what about the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8) with its example of importuning somebody for bread? So obviously, in an allegory, the one being importuned is God. But God is tucked up in bed with his family, and cannot get up to give him something. Who's the family, and what kind of image of God is it? What kind of help is a God who can't be bothered to get out of bed because he's in bed with his family?!

And it's even worse with the parable of the widow who wouldn't leave the unjust judge alone and kept pestering him (Luke 18.1-8). So, is Jesus really saying that God is like an unjust judge who only gives in if we bang on the door hard enough and annoy him sufficiently? Thus there are all sorts of problems with allegorizing the parables. In his hugely important book, *The Parables of Jesus* (first published in 1954), Joachim Jeremias demonstrates that the whole point about parables is that they have a single main point and they are not to be allegorized. They are a 'roundabout' (*para-bole* in Greek, remember) way of communicating this crucial point—and all the other details just make up the story or make it interesting and memorable. Jeremias' book has been literally 'seminal,' sowing this seed (*semen* in Latin)—and I use that word deliberately in this context—about the parables, disseminating it widely (there's that word again!).

This is reflected in what I do think is very clearly an authentic statement of the historical Jesus in his rather odd, but often repeated, saying, "Let those who have ears to hear, hear." In other words, the meaning of the parable is up to you to make sense of it. Jesus is not making it all perfectly clear and hunky dory. If you have ears, you have to listen. If you have eyes, you have to look. But it gives his audience the freedom to take things at different levels, depending on how

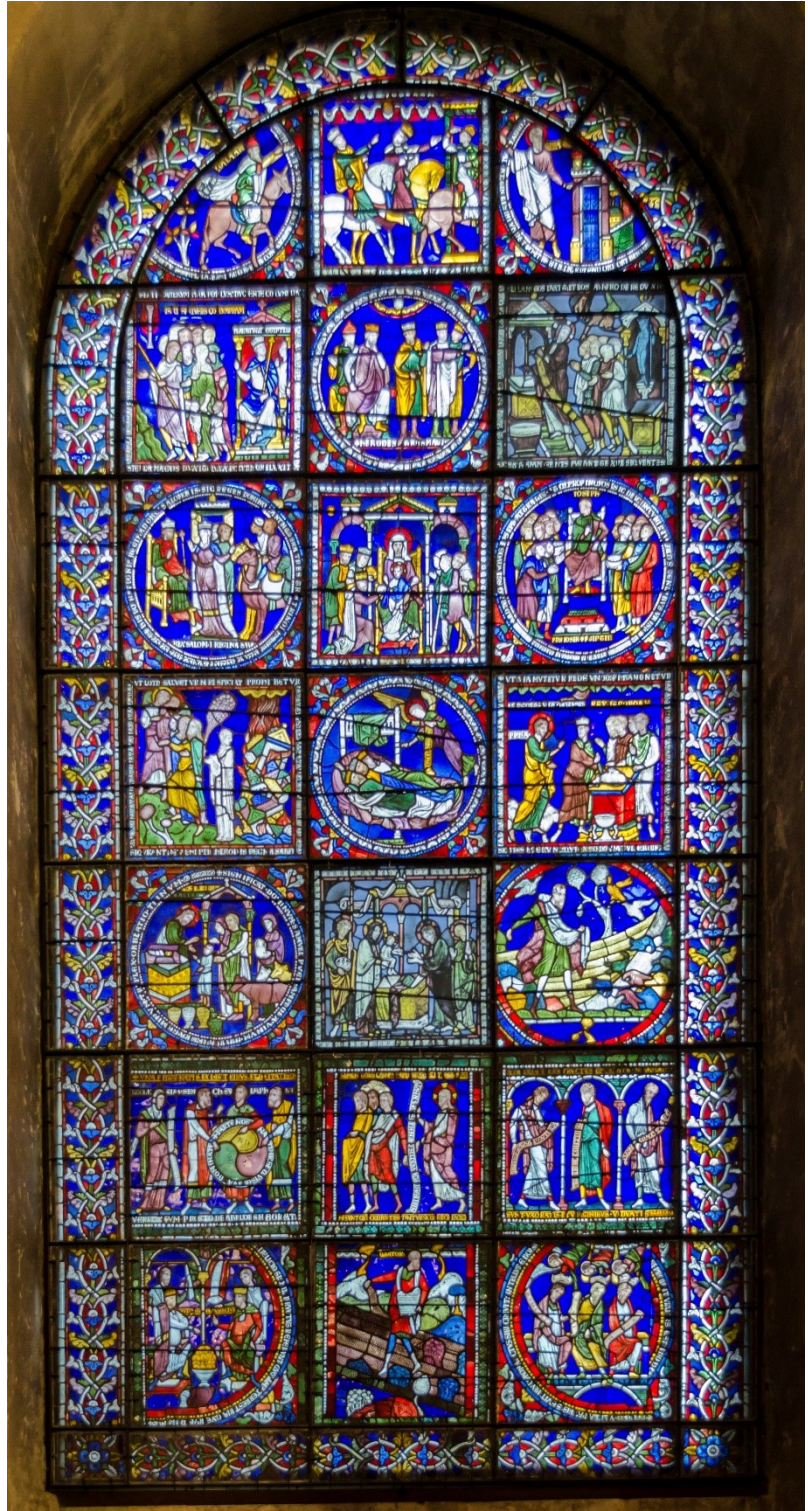
carefully they are willing to work. It takes us back to the stained-glass window in Virginia Seminary which is a bit impressionistic and rather blurred and unclear, with its blobs of different colours, white, green, red and blue. What do *you* see when *you* look at it?

I am quite sure that there were subsistence farmers, scratching a living on the hills around the Sea of Galilee who listened to Jesus teaching and said, “You know, that young preacher boy from Nazareth? He really understands what fields are like. I’ve got bloomin’ fields just like that, and the seed lands on the path and the birds take it away, and it lands on the rocks, and it grows up and withers, or gets choked by thistles, and so on. And trying to get a decent yield on your precious seed is really a job. I don’t go much for religion, but this one does at least understand what it’s like for poor folk like me.” And if they went away with no other point than that Jesus understood what subsistence farming was like for them in their life, well, that was a small *seed* of the word of God, *sown* in their hearts.

Now, let’s think a little bit more about this sower. In the original window at Canterbury, the sower’s not even looking where he’s throwing the seed, but his head is turned away. This is not a very good habit for a sower. If you’re a subsistence farmer, getting hold of seed is hard work. You have to get one year’s produce, eat some and save some for next year. Every seed you put aside to sow again is one less seed for you to feed your family with. So when you do come to sow it, it is very valuable, and, therefore, you make sure you sow your seed very deliberately in carefully prepared soil. You haven’t got enough to go around chucking it willy-nilly wastefully on rocks, paths, or places where there are thistles. And yet, that’s exactly what he’s doing, this sower, who is being held up to us as a good example by Jesus . . . Not very bright is he? And, likely to starve too, if he goes on behaving like that.

If you look at another image from the same window in Canterbury Cathedral, that sower does not even have a bag, just a large knotted piece of cloth around his neck, full of seed, and he’s just chucking it anywhere by the handful. He’s completely surrounded by thistles that have grown up as high as he is. You can also see these wonderfully drawn birds, all gleefully helping themselves to seeds scattered all over the path, and lots of very shallow things growing down on the rocks at the edges. The guy’s crazy—an idiot. This is not how a sower should function. It’s not a careful use of the seed. The man knows nothing about husbanding his precious resources—and his family will starve. And Jesus is giving him to us as an example? Excuse me, but really . . . ??

"Canterbury Cathedral window n.XV," a photograph by J. Guffogg and J. Hannan showing a twelfth-century stained-glass window in Canterbury Cathedral



And yet, this is what God is like, Jesus says. God is *not* a careful husbandman of precious seed, protecting it and only putting it into special places that have been carefully prepared for maximum growth. God is as crazy as Dean Ian Markham dreaming of a wonderful new Chapel with beautiful stained-glass windows. God is an idiot who goes around throwing seed anywhere and everywhere in the hope that something might grow somewhere, regardless of the cost or the possible waste. For me, I've begun to realize that this is actually not the parable of the *sower*, nor the parable of the *soils*, not even the parable of the *seed*, but the parable of the lunatic, crazy owner of the seed who doesn't seem to be stingy or even careful with it, but wants to just spread it anywhere and everywhere.

Bear in mind, this is the 12th century. People don't have Bibles. They don't read Bibles, and if they did, it'd be in Latin anyway. These windows are the only Bible that ordinary people get to read. Jesus was speaking to large crowds of ordinary people, so large he had to get into a boat in order to talk to them spread out on the shore in front of him. And this is where the large crowds in the 12th century would learn their Bible stories from—on stained glass. On this Canterbury window, you can clearly see all these little circles—all these little seeds—everywhere.

Nature is not just crazy—it is completely profligate. Oak trees cover the ground underneath them with acorns, most of which get eaten by pigs or simply rot away, in the hope that one or two will take root. "A mature oak, between 40 and 120 years old, can produce 10,000 acorns in a mast [bumper] year. A million acorns is not beyond the ambitions of a long-lived tree. And if just one acorn germinates and grows into a mature tree, the strategy has worked."² Human beings are even more crazily over-productive: "A fertile male human ejaculates between 2 and 5 milliliters of semen (on average about a teaspoon). In each milliliter there are normally about 100 million sperm."³ In other words, each one of you is a result of one sperm in between 200-500 million in the semen (there's that word again) making it and getting through. You are a one in hundreds of millions kind of person!

² Simon Barnes, "Nature: Why, Every Few Years, Does the Mighty Oak Produce so Many Acorns?," *The Sunday Times Magazine*, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nature-why-the-mighty-oak-produces-thousands-of-acorns-in-a-mast-year-d8xf50px5>.

³ Charles Lindemann, "Sperm Facts," *Oakland.edu*, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://files.oakland.edu/users/lindeman/web/spermfacts.htm>.

This profligacy in nature reflects the creator God who scatters seed willingly in vast quantities anywhere—on paths, rocks, thistles, even good soil—and everywhere in the hope that *something* will take root, and grow. This extraordinary mediaeval window in Canterbury and its beautifully blurred reflection in Virginia Seminary is nothing less than a meditation upon this profligacy of a creator God who throws seed everywhere and anywhere. And, yes, all right, you *can* develop it into the question of what kind of fruit do we bear forth? That's where you can then go into all that stuff about the Parable of the Soils, if you really want to.

But, at its heart, this parable is just an amazing picture of the crazy generosity of God. Of the totally and freely overflowing love of God. That generosity, and that love, and that complete abandonment is shown to us in the profligacy of nature. Whatever else this parable is about, it does NOT tell us just to go and give the word to the 'right' people, and sow it only in soil that's been very carefully prepared. We have to proclaim the word in season and out of season. To those who want to hear it—and those who don't want to hear it. To those who will let it go and forget it immediately. To those who will embrace it at first but then wither or allow it to be choked by the cares of the world. And we have no idea what the consequences are of what we do when we throw God's seed around the place. That's the whole point of the other parables like the Seed Growing Secretly when the sower doesn't know how it happened (Mark 4.26-30). Or Paul's comments about 'I've sown and others will reap' or 'I've entered into the sowing of others' and so on (see 1 Cor 3.5:9; cf. John 4:38). What this all means for us as Christians is to be as generous and as open-hearted and, yes, as silly and as crazy as God throwing seed anywhere and everywhere, and praying and hoping for the Spirit to come and bring the growth.

I want to conclude as I began—with the three windows of the VTS chapel. The first window represents the Creator, the God and Father and Mother of us all. It is full of trees with oak leaves reminding us of nature producing millions of acorns. Then we go to the representation of Jesus as Sower, crazily throwing out seed anywhere and everywhere. Thirdly we have the dove of the Spirit, spreading her wings to take flight. And, of course, these windows are in the Chapel of a Seminary, taking us once again back to the Latin for seed, *semen*. Seed again. It's always seed. It's a *Seminary*, for God's sake—literally! Virginia Theological Seminary is a place where the seeds of the faith are sown with profligate generosity, and then you are sent out on the wings of the Spirit, to *disseminate* the faith anywhere and everywhere, in season and out of season, to those who are receptive and those who could not care less. For a seminary brooded over by

the Holy Trinity, I think it's an incredible set of windows, broadcasting its purpose as widely as any sower can throw seed. Maybe Dean Markham is not so crazy after all . . .

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