

Parable of the Soils

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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In today's Gospel reading, we find ourselves once again sitting at the feet of the Master, alongside the disciples and the crowds. Jesus chose to teach as he often did, using parables, taking everyday scenes from life, to illustrate heavenly truth. Jesus was taking the familiar to illustrate heavenly truths. In one of the Arch series of Christian Children's books, we have the story of the people that Jesus met as a boy. We meet shepherds with lost sheep and farmers sowing their fields: fishermen casting nets and merchants seeking their fortunes. Although written for children, this book is a reminder to us all that in his parables, Jesus was taking the familiar to illustrate heavenly truths.

At the start of the twenty-first century, this can be a problem. What do you think of when you hear: "a sower went out to sow?" Do we not conjure up an image of a man sitting on his tractor towing a seed drill over a freshly prepared paddock? (Or perhaps over raised beds?) We no longer sow our food crops as in Jesus day, but anyone involved in the sowing of a lawn can pick up the image. For this reason, the parable of the sower is a popular teaching topic. In addition, Jesus explains the parable for the sake of his disciples. This is a bonus for those teaching about the passage, as the passage itself can do the work for you.

In the interpretation recorded, the seed represents the word of God and the soils, the different conditions of those who hear it. For us regularly in church it is easy to relate this our current situation. Think of this activity now. I stand here speaking to the congregation about God's word. The preacher is the sower, the sermon is the seed and the congregation the soil. This is an interesting concept, which challenges us to look at ourselves. What of soil are we? What reaction does God's word have when it reaches us? The parable gives us four alternate react to God's word.

Are we the pathway where the seed cannot penetrate because of the harness of our hearts? Does God speak but we do not listen? What sort of person is this? What image comes to mind? A bikie with Harley Davidson and Tattoos? A hard drinking miner? Yet many of these people are being reached with the Gospel. In Jesus' day it was those closest to religious things that exhibited the hardest hearts. The Pharisees had no time for the teaching of our Lord while at the same time they held themselves to be in tune with God. When we externalise our religion, busy ourselves with outward observance but not changing within we become like the pathway? Or are we like the stony ground able to accept the seed The thin soil is quite favourable initially as the rocks heat up and retain the heat for the seeds that it receives. Often these seeds will be the first to germinate. Yet what advances life is also endangers it. Moisture is not retained and the heat of the day sees the new plant wither and die. How did we receive the Gospel? Was it joyously and with a flurry of activity became immersed in the life of the Church? But have our roots gone deep. We may be keen to do everything, engrossed in many activities in the church reading the lessons serving at the altar, running the guild or the Sunday School. Can we face a real or even imaginary difficulty when it arises? Or has our faith no roots and no resources to withstand the pressure. It is easy to be involved in the good times, but it is when our faith is tested that we will know its strength.

Or are we thorny ground where our faith is crowded out by other things? Thorns grow in the good soil, so the seed could flourish here if it had a chance. But the fruit needs space to emerge.

The thorns are those things that fill the ground meant for the seed. On their own, they seem harmless enough, even beneficial - after all the thorns may protect the crop from grazing animals. At another time and in another place Louise and I worked with Young Adults in the church. These were good kids, and one could say that they were keen to grow in Christ. Yet often, it was the things of the world that got in the way.

"I couldn't come to bible study this week, because there was this really great movie on Television - it was really good". "I can't get up in the morning to come to church because Sunday is my only day to sleep in." "I didn't get around to reading the bible because I had indoor cricket practice." "I was going to put ten dollars in the plate this week, but on Saturday I saw this really great pair of Jeans on sale so I put them onto Lay-by."

I think that these young people are typical of many in the church. They didn't mean to, but they allowed their church life to become crowded out - not by bad things but by choosing the good rather than the best. Because God speaks in a still small voice the world could drown Him out. It doesn't really matter whether it is games, or studies, or social obligations, or details of our job, or the whims of our friends, or theatre or even good deeds, these harmless things can fill the ground set aside for the seed. Often they grow like weeds and demand more and more time until the end result is the production of nothing.

Or are we the good soil? Here the seed reproduces itself in fruitful abundance. These are those who upon receiving the word of God in their hearts exhibit the Christian virtues, becoming an integral part of the body of Christ. We have all met them. People who seem to have one foot in heaven already.

Now this is fact the classical way of looking at this parable. Yet there are number of problems with it. I think there are times when I feel like each of the different soils. There are times when I have been touched deeply by God's word and yet at other times I just switch off to it. I believe that as members of the church, we have a responsibility to grow in the faith, in essence to improve the soil. We must plough up those areas which are hardened, deepen our roots in the rocky places and get in and remove the thorns. Christianity is a journey and not a destination. This is why we talk of our Christian walk.

If we look at the circumstances of Jesus teaching, he is not describing the action of God's word in the church, but in the world. He is explaining, the reasons why not all who hear the Gospel will respond. Billy Graham has stated that of those who come forward during his crusade, only one in seven will continue as a Christian. He also makes the observation that those who continue are those who have been prepared to receive the message by Christian friends.

What if I was to say that the church is the sower and the congregation the seed. Then each week, the dismissal "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" is not the end of the activity, but its commencement. We are broadcast into the world like the individual seeds, and where we find ourselves at work, or play, here we are the word of God, and as we come into contact with the good soil, here we will bear fruit. This interpretation has a lot going for it. When the word of God takes root our lives we become fruitful, and even an amateur gardener like me knows the relationship between fruit and seed.

Or perhaps we are the sower. The seed is the Word of the Lord as lived out in our lives. John describes Jesus as the Word and as Christians we are to be Jesus to the world.

As I was once told, "if a non-believer is to meet Jesus, he will only be met in a Christian's Life". This is what is meant when we describe ourselves as the body of Christ. We are his hands and feet in the world.

As we close the word of God this morning, let us just pause for a moment and think of our response. Has the seed found good soil? Has it produced in us a harvest? Are we ready to go out into the world to sow?

"But blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear"

AMEN