

**ADDRESS****12 July 2020****6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

Genesis 25. 19-34

Esau sells his birthright

Psalm 119. 105-112

Your word is a lamp to my feet

Romans 8.1-11

No more death

Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

The parable of the sower

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear  
and to understand your Word, and  
open our hearts to do your will. We  
ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

*The parable of the sower*

As the first apostles began to fulfil their great commission, to go and make disciples of all nations, they ran into all kinds of difficulties and disappointments and dangers. Some paid for their witness with their lives. So it is not surprising that they recalled and recorded Jesus' parable that we read as our Gospel for the day. They had committed to become sowers of the seed, but the sowing often failed to produce a harvest.

This reading is not really an account of the *Agricultural practices of peasant farmers in Galilee in the first century AD*, is it? So, what **is** it about? . . .

This is a story about mission, it's a story preserved by the early church as the first missionaries made dangerous journeys by land and by sea to create communities of believers throughout the Roman empire. This was their mission field.

The parable has five elements. Firstly,

**the sower.**

Of course, the ultimate sower is God, and some commentators tell us that this is another story about the prodigality of God – the God who creates and sustains all life, even those who reject his love. St Paul saw himself as a sower – in his first letter to the church in Corinth about his mission, he says *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow* . . . (1 Cor 3.6 ).

Every missionary is a sower -- Jesus was the first, then the apostles, then all the teachers and preachers following. But the commission to be a sower is not just for them, but for all believers, for all time. It's for us. Whenever we find something good, we want to share it, from a recipe to a bargain, but especially our faith. Just as every Galilean peasant was a sower, so every professing Christian needs to be a sower.

We're hearing a lot about Captain Cook this year, 250 years after he landed at Kurnell. But not everyone realises he was a great sower as well as a great navigator and explorer.

When he first landed in the islands of Tonga in 1773, James Cook found that the people had a limited diet of yams and sweet potato. So he had his men scatter seeds of corn and melons

around the edges of their food gardens; he had no idea whether or not the seeds would even germinate, much less produce fruit. But when he returned, on his second voyage, a year later, he found his seeds had produced a good harvest and added new, healthier foods to the people's starchy diet. The Tongan chiefs welcomed him back with such enthusiasm that Cook named the islands the Friendly Islands. This story can be seen as another parable. Sowers are called to sow even when they cannot be certain of a harvest. But a successful sowing brings great joy.

Second, we have **The evil one**, the adversary

As in the story of Jesus' temptations, so in this parable the enemies of the sower are personified, telling us they are multiple, snatching away the seed or stifling it before it can yield a harvest. Each of the three Gospel accounts of Jesus' parable uses a different word for the enemy:

Today's reading, from Matthew, uses the Greek word *poneros* [pon-ay-ros']

-- which has the meaning 'evil, bad, wicked, malicious, or slothful'. Sometimes these words describe us, we can be an enemy of the Gospel.

Mark's gospel uses the word *Satanas* [sat-an-as']

which means 'an adversary, an accuser'. The Gospel has always had plenty of those. Men and women who deny and oppose the truth.

Luke's gospel uses the word *diabolos* [dee-ab'-ol-os],

'the devil, the traducer, the distorter of truth'. In Scripture, *diabolos* is always a false idea, and the greatest enemies of the faith have always been the dominant values of the majority society, from blind obedience to the law and emperor worship in the first century to the false ideas of today, including that our identity is governed by race or gender, rather than by our relationship with God, or that the only way to happiness is through possessions, money, power. . .

Today's culture accepts distortions of Buddhist teaching about self-improvement – some shopping centres will display ads for classes in mindfulness, or yoga, or meditation, but balk at having nativity scenes at Christmas. That's seen as too religious, too divisive. Hugh Mackay published a perceptive book on the state of religion in Australia four years ago, with the title *Beyond Belief*. There's a link to a summary of his findings in *Connections*. I recommend it.

The next element in the story is **The seed**.

Jesus tells us what the seed is – the Good News of the Kingdom of God. But many people sow other seed when they talk about their spiritual life – they may speak in negative terms, saying *God*

says *it is wrong to do this or that* when Jesus spoke in positives, about the God of love and the commandments to love.

Or they may say things like *our church is like a family . . .* or *our church has a beautiful building . . .* or *our minister is a great preacher . . .* or *we have a great children's program* – which may all be true, and good, but the key message we should be sharing is that *in our church we learn that an abundant life is possible, by living in the grace of God.*

That is what every truly Bible-based church teaches, although some churches will sow the seed in different ways from others, using forms of worship and different music, and different preaching styles. The seed we sow is greater than our fullest understanding of it – as we were reminded in the hymn the choristers sang earlier, it is always true that

*The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.*

That is why we need to keep studying the Bible and Christian teaching – no-one has the whole truth, although many people think they have; theology is a journey, not a destination.

Next comes, **The soil**

Jesus warns us that much of the ground we sow is barren –

we will witness to the dismissive                      and to the shallow

and to the worldly                      as well as to the receptive

without knowing which is which. The people who heard the story first would have known, from the Torah, that thorns and thistles are the products of mankind's first disobedience (Gen. 3.18). This gave added depth to the parable.

But, to continue the farming allegory, this is where we have an advantage over the Galilean peasant -- we can prepare the ground to give us a better chance of producing a harvest from our witness.

Last week, Marty and I travelled to Griffith, to meet a group which has been working through one of my study books for several months. What we saw as we were shown around the district was the careful preparing of the soil, in multiple ways, for multiple crops – citrus, grapes, wheat, rice, canola . . . The ground is enriched with different fertiliser combinations for each crop and watered by a network of irrigation canals distributing water from the Burrinjuck Dam.

In Jesus's day, the farmer had to do the best he could with the ground he had. Now farmers can prepare the ground and give every seed a better chance to come good. And we can prepare the ground for what we say by how we live, and approach different people in different ways.

Sowing the seed is not simply fronting up to someone and challenging them with, *Are you saved?* When people see that we live the Gospel, when they see that we truly love, when they see our random acts of kindness, they are more ready to hear the message. We cannot be greedy and keep the Gospel to ourselves, to say nothing, to sow nothing. The world needs more people who will both prepare the ground for mission, and actually sow the seed, speak about the Word of God.

But finally, we have **The harvest**

Jesus assures us that there **will** be a harvest, there has been, year on year, for almost 20 centuries. We ourselves are part of that harvest, we are people redeemed from sin and death, through other people's sowing. This is our birthright, we must not sell our birthright as Esau did.

The period from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20 century was the era of mass evangelism – of John Wesley and Spurgeon and Charles Spurgeon and Billy Graham and many others. That era seems to be over, although some preachers keep trying. As the images in *Connections* suggest, the primary form of evangelism today is personal witness. But too few believers, too few people like us, are willing to tell non-believers what they are missing.

This is one reason why Christianity is declining in some parts of the world, in Western Europe and Australia, even in the United States, which is still one of the most religious countries on earth. Too many people fail to pass on the Good News which has blessed them. Religion is being shut away as a personal matter, a private matter. It is far more than that. Shared beliefs shape a nation.

But in parts of Africa and South America the churches are growing, as clergy and lay people joyfully celebrate their salvation with their family and friends. The clergy are generally poorly paid, often they are unpaid – many shame clergy in the West who may see the ministry as a job, as the pathway to a good life for themselves and their families, or to personal authority or power. Like the sower in the parable, we are to sow to reap a harvest for God, not for ourselves.

Jesus' disciples did not understand the parable, that's recorded in the verses which are omitted from today's reading, but Jesus carefully explains what it means– it's a call to us to be sowers, to spread the gospel without knowing whether or not we will produce a harvest, to reveal both by how we live and by what we say that we are committed to the values which create true happiness.

This is not just a one-time call – it is a day-after-day challenge, to all of us. Let us pray that we may be willing to rise to the challenge, to witness to the faith which saves us. #

**The parable of the sower. Matthew 13. 1-9, 18-23**



MASS EVANGELISM



PERSONAL WITNESS

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-22/hugh-mackay-beyond-belief/7432866>