

## **Nurture the seed**

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

Pentecost 4A, 10 July 2011

*Isaiah 55.1-13, Psalm 65.8-13, Romans 8.1-11, Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23*

Can you remember when the seed of God's Kingdom was planted in you? It was definitely planted because you are sitting in a pew here at St Philip's. Perhaps you have sat in many other churches or temples. Perhaps the seed was planted in you many years ago and your life journey has taken you on strange and unexpected paths that seem like they have nothing to do with the seed of God's Kingdom. Whatever you have done, where ever you have been and whether you have at times you have drifted away from a committed faith, or whether you cannot actually remember the occasion, the seed was planted.

For me it happened when I was about 5 years old. I came from a non-religious family even though my mother had been the church organist at the Methodist church before she married my Dad. In my home religion was very suspect and any type of institutional authority even more suspect. Despite this my brothers and I went to the local catholic school. I distinctly remember the first time I walked into the Catholic Church next to the school. I was a little girl and I snuck in there at recess. It was dark and gloomy but as I turned around and looked up I was mesmerized by the Rose window above the entrance to the church. Honestly God's word, God's light, landed in me like an arrow. I fell in love with God there and then. I would take any opportunity to sit in church and later I would take myself off to Sunday mass while my family slept. Of course the next 40 years have been not so easy or simple and my journey of faith has been complicated and messy but the seed was sown and my life from that point was forever changed.

From our own experiences and from the wisdom of our Gospel parable it is obvious that God is an extravagant and hopeful sower. God showers every variety of soil with the same seed, apparently also the same quantity, regardless of the soil's ability to produce fruit. Regardless of age, ability or background. Every soil is showered with seed. If God is the sower then we along with God's spirit are the gardeners of our soul and our responsibility is to till the soil of our inner being.

Let's then look at the parable more closely to get an idea of what we need to be doing as these gardeners.

The parable of the sower is one of a set of parables in this section of Matthew's gospel that teach about the nature of the Kingdom of God. At this point in the narrative Jesus has been preaching and teaching about the Kingdom in the region of Galilee and the town of Capernaum, a territory that turned out to be very unreceptive to his message and the message of the evangelists that came after. All the parables in one way or another address this lack of receptiveness and rejection of the message.

If you look at Jesus teachings he was never concerned with some golden, transformed future. He wasn't particularly interested in some future reality but was focused on the present dimension of God's Kingdom and rule. For Jesus the Kingdom was at hand, breaking into the world and confronting men and women with a decision. Would they accept or reject the message and God's call? This is why there is immediacy to the Gospels and why the message is so confronting. It is meant to push us to the point of choice and ultimately commitment.

So this first parable lays out some of the basic reasons why the message of Christ either lands and withers within us, or whether it lands and thrives, producing an abundant harvest. The parable is also important because it is one of the few Jesus actually explains. For parables generally work the same way that the Hebrew *marshal* did and Zen Koans do. They do not give clear answers but tease the mind into insight.

Jesus explains that the seed in the parable is the word of God, if you like the message of God that the prophet speaks. Christians have understood the word to be synonymous with Jesus Christ himself. He is the Word of God made flesh as the prologue to John puts it. This word has creative power and potential just as a seed does and it requires the right environment just as seed does to flourish and grow within us. After reading scripture during morning and evening prayer the response from the prayer book is, “May your word live in us and bear much fruit to your Glory”. Along with the notion of seed we also have a text that is clearly about different types of soil. It encourages us to consider ourselves, to find ourselves in one variety of dirt or another. Are we as hard as the path? Do we allow Jesus’ words to penetrate our hearts not at all? Or are we perhaps rocky ground that appears to allow the word to take root, only to see it wither? Am I soil choked with weeds? Or am I fertile soil? Do I yield fruit?

According to the parable there are three things that stop the seed growing in us and bearing fruit:

The first is the path where the birds come and steal the seed away. Jesus tells us this is an analogy for the fact that we do not understand. This is not about intellectual understanding; such as the way we might understand the laws of gravity or a philosophical argument—which is just as well. If faith were only a matter of intellectual ability many of us would be in deep trouble. Understanding in this passage is related to the Old Testament concept of how we grow in faith. As Psalm 119 never tires of telling us, understanding the word is fundamentally a moral commitment involving one’s inmost self. “Give me understanding that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart” says verse 34. This type of understanding is a gift that we must both want and accept. It is about conversion, that change of heart and orientation. Some of the people with the richest, deepest faith are those who don’t try and understand in an intellectual way. Instead they let the word of God dwell in them, pondering the message in their hearts and trusting in God to give them understanding—that is more commitment and more trust.

This is such an important distinction for us humans to understand. To give just one example, climate scientists around the world are tearing their hair out because significant other people are simply not getting the importance, the critical need for immediate and strong action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Scientists have thought that if they just present the research, facts and statistics then we would see the light and make changes. But this is not happened. Jesus knew the problem two thousand years ago. To change behaviour takes a change of heart, a conversion. The intellect and reason may be involved but in the end the whole person, heart and soul must know and understand and be prepared to change. Having ditched religion in favour of scientific materialism and rationalism I think we are now in a right deep pickle.

The second problem is rocky ground. This is when the seed that is planted within us does not take root because of the troubles and persecutions that can come our way because of the message of Christ. A person I know who had recently decided they would follow Christ, that is become a Christian, has had to run the gauntlet of his friends and family.

“You don’t really believe that stuff do you?” is their scornful question.

It is taking all the courage he can muster to keep following the path he has decided is right for him. In Australia the worst a Christian can face is usually derision and it can be particularly hard when it comes from family and friends. In some countries Christians do not have the same rights as other groups and to be a Christian is to risk your life. They face oppression, imprisonment, torture and death. (South Sudan) When Matthew was writing his gospel it was also not a safe thing to be a follower of Christ and many would have given up and taken the easier path, not just for their sake but no doubt for the sake of their families. It has taken me along time to finally admit and to accept the consequences that being a Christian never was and never will be a popular past time. Troubles, persecutions, difficulties are part of the package. But perhaps we should rejoice in this because it means the message we proclaim is doing it's job—confronting injustice, revealing the darkness in our societies, naming sin and calling people back to their true purpose, which is to love, glorify and serve God. Who wants to hear that stuff? Why would we ever think that would go over well?

The last difficulty Jesus names is the thorns. They are a metaphor for the cares of the world and our concern for wealth. Jesus names this problem in other places in the gospels, perhaps most famously in his saying that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Our belongings, our things, our money can weigh us down and consume our energy and attention. However it is not the things in themselves that are the problem. It is our attachment to them and how they become part of our identity and purpose. Along with this attachment seems to come jealousy and greed. At the spiritual formation group on Thursday night we were reflecting that it seems to be much harder for those with the most to loose to follow the teachings of Jesus than those who have nothing. Perhaps this why the first evangelists had much more success with slaves, women, outcasts and the poor than they did with the well off middle class. Wealth does get in the way and it is a serious issue for us rich Christians in the developed world. I don't have the answer friends. I just know that I personally have to work a lot harder at detaching myself from attachment and concerns about wealth and property so that I can be more available for Christ and his way. The simplest way for me to do that is to align my desires with Christ's and trust that I will hit the right mark.

And so we come to the good soil, the soil that grows a plant that produces abundantly. Apparently this abundance is not just a huge amount, beyond the normal. It is off the charts. Back then an abundant harvest was ten fold. A hundredfold harvest was inconceivable. To cultivate that good soil it seems we must do what we would do with the soil in our vegetable patch. Firstly, we take out the stones and rocks, thorns and weeds. That is we deal with our attachments and fears. Next we fertilize and nurture the soil. We fill up our lives with what is good and true. We open our souls to the grace and goodness of God, connecting to God through prayer, meditation and communion. We pray for the gift of understanding so that our hearts will be changed and we will then be able to change our behaviour. And then we wait. And wait. And pray and wait. Sometime we have to wait years tending and nurturing the soil and plant. And then we begin to see that the seed is bearing fruit, abundantly, miraculously, and we are truly part of and playing our part in God's Kingdom of peace, justice and forgiveness.

May the seed of God's Kingdom grow in you one day at a time. May you bear much fruit to God's glory and service.