

**SERMON FOR SUNDAY 12TH JULY 2020
ORDINARY 15A**

READINGS: Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11 & Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Whilst I was travelling through Provence in the south of France, I saw quite a few wheat fields that appeared to be ready for harvest. The paddocks were much smaller than what we're used to seeing, and some of the wheat was fairly short, but it was golden and ripe with ears full of grain.

But there was something different about these wheat crops compared to Australian ones. This difference was that there were red poppy flowers peeping from among the ears of wheat, and more than a few green weeds entangled in the grain. The poppies were the same ones that we use to commemorate Anzac Day, and they were jaunty and bright.

However, I couldn't help but think that not too many Australian farmers would have been impressed by such a sight, as the weeds and wild flowers might well cause difficulties in the harvest and contaminate the grain.

The sight of the golden fields also cast my mind back to that parable which we read today – one that is very familiar to many of us, often called the Parable of the Sower, although some other names have been suggested for it including The Parable of the Miraculous Harvest, The Parable of the Good and Bad Soil, The Parable of the Careless Sower, and a favourite of mine, The Parable of the Extravagant Sower.

This last re-naming, The Parable of the Extravagant Sower, appeals to me because there is something very extravagant about the way the sower in the parable flings around seed with it landing all over the place- on rocks, on pathways, among thistles, on shallow, hard ground as well as on the cultivated field.

Now I'm sure that many of you, like me, were told back in Sunday School days, that old time farmers who sowed seed by casting it by hand, wasted a lot of seed because they couldn't control their throwing well enough. And that, just like in the parable, a lot of seed landed where it didn't have a hope of growing well; but I've come to believe that that's nonsense.

I'm pretty confident that we can refute that wasteful sowing theory. For a start, let's think about why someone would plant a crop. Quite clearly, then as now, they planted a crop because they wanted a harvest. And farmers then, just as farmers now, would have wanted the best possible harvest that they could obtain. In fact, farmers then had more riding on a crop than farmers do today because there was no welfare, and no social services that they could fall back on if the harvest failed. And most peasant farmers were poor. They lived hand to mouth and they couldn't afford to be wasteful. A poor crop would have meant that the farmer's family would have gone hungry for at least part of the year, therefore they would have done all within their power to be as careful as possible in how they planted the grain. For the grain was a precious resource, and most farmers are pretty careful with precious resource.

Therefore, when they sowed the seed, the farmers would have been very careful not to throw the grain on footpaths or roads, or among thistles or rocks, or on dry, inhospitable ground. The birds of the air they wouldn't have been able to do much about, though I'm sure they did their best to keep them off the crop using scarecrows and getting the children and dogs to chase them away. And I'm sure that most farmers would have become pretty skilled at casting seed, and would have been able to make sure it landed pretty close to where they wanted it to and spread pretty evenly.

Now, one of the features of parables is that they include something unexpected or a surprising twist. Perhaps it is the extravagant, wasteful sowing that is the twist in this parable.

So, let's think about what this might mean to us.

In Jesus' explanation of the parable he talks about the harvest being the response to the word of the kingdom, in other words, the response to the word or acts of God. Therefore, God is the extravagant sower.

So why might God be such an extravagant sower? And what is it that God sows?

Well, clearly God seeks to sow God's words into the human heart and conscience. God speaks to us about how to live and act and think, not by brain washing us, but by helping us to discern and understand what is good and moral and loving.

This God does in and through the life of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Scriptures and as proclaimed in preaching and teaching. God also speaks to us through the written, acted and spoken testimonies of the people of God and in the traditions and teachings of the Church. God also speaks to us through the power of the Holy Spirit prompting our consciences and seeking to guide us in God's ways.

We also know that God gives us Spiritual gifts and abilities. Surely these are God's seed sown in our lives – both the gifts that are individual to each one of us but also the fruit of the Spirit- Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control,

Thomas Merton, a twentieth century monk and mystic, has suggested an interesting way to perceive how God might acting in our lives using the analogy of seeds and sowing.

He writes:

Every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.

Merton is inviting us to see that Jesus' Parable of the Sower is not about the occasional moment when God or a human evangelist sows a seed about God. Rather, that God is always sowing spiritual seeds, but our capacity to receive these seeds is limited by what sort of soil we are – good or bad, rock-filled or thorn-infested.

Carl Gregg suggests that to be receptive to God's seeds we need to till and fertilise the inner soil of our souls by committing to spiritual practices which open us up to God's presence and guidance. Things like regularly praying including spending time in silent, contemplative prayer, and by practicing Sabbath so that we set aside work and other preoccupations and be open to God's presence and to receiving the day in gratitude. I would also want to add that time spent reading, studying and contemplating the Scriptures, and devotional and other writings that help us think about our faith, also help open us up to God's leading. Gregg and Merton both express concern that over-busyness, especially when accompanied by fear, anxiety and selfishness, is toxic to our spiritual lives and growth. Gregg acknowledges that this overbusyness is not always our choice, but suggests that we do whatever we can to free ourselves from overbusyness so that we can till the soil of our inner lives.

He also suggests that works of mercy – like feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, helping the poor, help cultivate the inner soil of love, for as we practice setting aside our egos and engage in acts of loving-kindness toward others we find that love becomes more and more our second nature.

These ideas are, I believe, well worth contemplating.

Perhaps at the moment, whilst the COVID restrictions are altering most people's social and other interactions, there may well be other reasons for struggling to spend time with God or undertake spiritual practices, and certainly opportunities to serve others in practical ways have been limited. Routines have been disrupted, support networks may not be able to fully function, many people feel like their lives are "all at sea" and may well be experiencing anxiety and loneliness, or feelings of uselessness or boredom or staleness from a lack of stimulation.

Those with the internet are fortunate in that they can connect with many resources including online worship services, Christian music, Bible study material and more. But everyone can seek to put some time aside daily to read the Bible, perhaps revisiting a favourite book (even if it is just for five minutes) and spending some time reflecting on what has been read, and praying (or just being quiet) seeking God's guidance. Maybe there's some music you can listen to or devotional books on your bookshelf you can re-read. Do what you can to remain connected to God.

Going back to the idea of God as The Extravagant Sower, then we can see that God is all the time trying to sow seeds into the hearts and souls of all people, and is not giving up on them when they are not receptive or open to God's word and God's love. This fits in well with what we know of God and God's actions through Jesus Christ. Remember how John 3:16-17 expressed God's purpose in sending Jesus:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

God is generous and loving, and God wants everyone to respond to God's word in Jesus Christ, and so God keeps on sowing in the hope that a harvest will finally come.

May we produce a harvest of love, faith and hope in our lives, and may we be open to God's continuing revelation to us. Amen.

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