
And Jesus told them many things in parables, saying:
“A sower went out to sow...
Hear then the parable of the sower...
As for what was sown on good soil,
this is the one who hears the word and understands it...
From Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The 12th July, 2020, marks a significant day for Grace Lutheran Congregation Redcliffe. It is the day we return to Worship together in a Church Building after COVID-19 Lockdown restrictions are eased. Here in Queensland we are currently enjoying the benefits of these Lockdown Restrictions. We know that in other places in Australia (and here we are particularly thinking of people in Victoria at this time), as in many other places in the world (particularly as we think of places such as the U.S., Brazil, India, Russia, Mexico, and in the African Continent) that there are still significant challenges ahead. Our thoughts and prayers remain with so many people and situations.

As we think of the many changes that have occurred in the world, and in people’s lives, as a result of COVID-19 and various responses to it, we may ask a question about ‘How has life changed?’ We could ask that question of individual people (How has life been different for you?), or for nations (note challenging economic situation; mental health issues for people; different ways of living, changes in lifestyle, and so many other things. And we could also ask this question in terms of churches, and various institutions, and the way people have had to adapt at this time. For some people, this has been a particularly challenging and life-altering time (and we should never down-play the negative impact COVID-19 has had on many people). But for others, it has actually brought many blessings and positive changes.

One of the questions we may have as a ‘Church’ and a ‘Congregation’ (note, this is both a broad question for all Christians and Christian Organisations, as all us for us locally) is how ‘Church’ may be different ‘moving forward. With the increased presence of many Congregations in the ‘digital realm’, but many people having ‘changed habits’ or changed situations due to ‘lockdown restrictions’, what does the future hold for ‘the church’? Here some people have been quite positive (seeing an ‘increased ‘reach’), whilst others have been more negative (perhaps more ‘realistic – noting that many of the people who have been negatively impacted are also ‘members’ of ‘the church’)

Although one shouldn’t make a direct correlation between Jesus’ ‘Parable of the Sower’ (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23), there are nevertheless some salient points that may be drawn from this ‘Parable’, and events around us today.

We know that when Jesus told this Parable it had an immediate impact on the people of His time. Jesus lived in an agrarian society, and all around were people who farmed. There was a very direct connection between wherever people lived, and farming life. Jesus' parables had illustrations just as obvious as cars on the road or people now using mobile phones. Jesus knew that most of the people in the crowd would say, "Wow, great story," and move along with their lives. When He ended the parable with, 'he who has ears to hear, let him hear,' Jesus was challenging them to think about the meaning of the parable.

The best part about Jesus' examples of the soil types is that a lot of us will experience a few of them in our own lives.

The first 'soil' Jesus spoke about was where 'Some fell along the path'. Picture a middle-eastern road hardened by years of travel by men and animals. What happens to the seed when it falls here? It sits out in the open for the birds to come and get it. If we don't take God's Word seriously, that's the soil we're representing.

There is also the soil where 'Some fell on rock'. This is usually seen as where people know the Word of God, but when they're tested, they collapse. They have no root. They're not planted deep enough in the soil, so God's Word hasn't truly become their foundation. It's a faith that springs up when times are good. But when the heat comes, just like the sun on a hot day, the small seedling that shot up on the rock will wither and die for lack of soil and water.

Another type of soil was where 'Other seed fell among thorns'. This is usually seen as where people hear God's word, but do nothing with it. They know the word, but don't truly accept it. They teach it, but don't practice it. If we're not earnestly seeking the Word of God, it leads to indifference about devotions and relationship with Him. So what happens? The source for satisfaction comes from external things (the thorns): riches, pleasures, and prosperity. Even though the seed was planted in good soil, the thorns choked it, just like these things can choke us from depending on God.

And then there is the soil where 'Still other seed fell on good soil, and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.' This is usually seen in terms of those people where God's Word seems to take deep root in people's lives, and people live visibly altered life for what is truly good – both in terms of active involvement in 'church' (such as attending worship, having devotions, and living a godly life in accord with God's Word), as well as actively reaching out to others in the world in the true and honest support of Christian organisations and institutions.

Sometimes we may ask 'What type of soil am I?' And it may indeed be good to do this to reflect on where our lives are at in relation to God and His Word. But there is something we always need to remember – Jesus described the Parable as 'The Parable of the Sower'. The 'soil' is important, but this is really about 'The Sower'....

The parable is simple: the sower (Christ) scatters His seed (His Word – the message of Good News) generously. Think About the Sower. If we reread the parable from the perspective of the sower, we get a better understanding of why Jesus called it the parable of the sower, not the parable of the soil.

Jesus shares that the sower scattered seed (the Word of God) on all types of ground. It didn't say that he was meticulously planting the seeds in designated 'good soil' areas – it says he was scattering the seed everywhere.

Now doesn't that seem wasteful though? I mean, if we were planting a field, why would we throw seed on rocks, thorns, and the side of the road? Wouldn't you want to be careful and put the seed in the good soil from the beginning? But remember what Jesus has said: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." (Luke 5:31).

Christ makes it clear that He came to rescue sinners. His purpose was to bring salvation to everyone. The meaning of the parable of the sower is twofold: First, it shows us how the different soils in our life can keep us from sharing God's truth with others. But secondly, and very importantly, it shows us that Christ came to share the Word of God with everyone. We don't serve a stingy God who picks and chooses who is good enough to hear the word. He graciously sows into everyone who is willing to receive His Word.

Think again about 'the good soil', and the generous Sower... Who are those "who hear the word and understand it, who indeed bear fruit" and yield an abundant harvest (13:23)? In Matthew's story it seems they are the least likely ones. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (21:31-32). In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the righteous bear fruit by serving the "least of these," and even they are surprised to find that they have been serving Jesus (25:34-40).

And as we think of Jesus telling this story to His disciples, we may ask 'What about the disciples? Will they ever bear fruit?' After telling several more parables, Jesus asks them, "Have you understood all this?" They confidently answer, "Yes" (13:51). Yet subsequent events will reveal how little they truly understand (16:21-23; 20:20-28) and how quickly they will desert Jesus to save their own skins (26:56b, 69-75).

What is remarkable is that in spite of these failings, Jesus does not give up on the disciples. In fact, He continues to invest in them, even to the point of entrusting the future of His mission to them. Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which He will build his church (16:13-20), even though Peter's understanding of what it means that Jesus is the Messiah is confused at best (16:21-23). Although Jesus knows full well that all the disciples will desert Him, and that Peter will deny Him, He nevertheless promises them, "But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (26:32). J

This parable of Jesus ends with a miracle when Jesus talks about a hundredfold harvest. It is a story filled with promise. It is all about the abundance we find as children of God, the abundance of a God of love who sows seeds in the most unlikely places as if it were all potentially good soil. This God of abundance even sows seed in the messiness of our own hearts. And, in the person of Jesus Christ, this sowing God of abundance gets down and dirty, working the ground, the soil of our being in the messed-up lives. This a God who is extravagant, and who gets involved in the 'soil of life' to the point of dying on a cross because of abundant love for this world. And, it is that abundant love and life we are called to share as we deeply connect with others and allow God to use us to sow seeds of forgiveness, grace and love into the lives of others.

There are many people who are anxious about 'the future' and 'their own lives'. We all should 'get this', as none of us are truly exempt from trial, challenges, and sin. Some may seek to 'hide this' by a hardness of heart or lack of empathy, or from just not thinking much about things, or filling their lives up with other things. But that's the truth of what it really means to be human in a broken world. But God sows His generous love in this world, and we know this is true because of Jesus. God has lived this life. He knows what it means to be buried in the ground. And He has been raised to newness of life. And He pours out His grace to us in Word and Sacrament, by the power of His Holy Spirit.

We may sometimes wonder if we are 'fruitful soil' of God's Word (either individually, or together in the life of 'the church'). But God is extravagant in His love. There are times when life is hard, when His love doesn't seem real, and the trials of this world seem to overwhelm us. But God is extravagant in His love for you, and all people. God has said He will build His church. And as you rejoice in knowing that gift of love and forgiveness and life and hope and peace in Christ Jesus, our future is sure. Let us always rejoice in God's incredible love as we rejoice in the life we have through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.