

District Convention of Synod Sunday, 12 June 2022 (Holy Trinity)

Synod Theme Text Matthew 13:1-9 – The Parable of the Sower. The text describes the hard soil of the path (4), rocky ground (5), the thorns (7), ‘Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty’ (8). This sermon also refers to the Synod Sunday Psalm, Psalm 137:1-6 and especially verse four: ‘How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?’

The Gospel reading for our Convention of Synod is a missional text – the parable of the sower. It calls us to acknowledge that the church is always in mission. On this Holy Trinity Sunday, it calls us to remember that the church was brought to birth on the day of Pentecost, for mission. It is called to confess that God becoming a human being was a missional act toward all humanity.

The church came into being for the sake of mission and exists ‘by mission, just as fire exists by burning. If it does not engage in mission, it ceases to be church.’ Those words are from an ecumenical missional affirmation by the World Council of Churches. And in our documents, we affirm that the LCA aims to fulfil the mission of the Christian Church in the world by proclaiming the Word of God and administering the Sacraments in accordance with the Confession of the Church.

As far as the LCA seeks to fulfil the Christian church’s mission in the world, its mission is the mission of the *entire* Christian church on earth. Because there is only *one* mission, and it’s *God’s* mission, the *missio dei*. So in this sense, God’s church doesn’t have a mission, but the mission of God has a church. And we are invited by God to see where God is *already* at work and join that, support that, and uphold that wherever and however we can. Sometimes it means getting out of the way of what God is *already* doing. Sometimes it’s about taking a risk and navigating uncharted waters.

A farmer goes out sowing seed, Jesus says. But this is no ordinary farmer; his actions are quite strange. He goes about the paddock, scattering the seed all over the place. He’s so lavish about what he is doing that he spreads them with unrestrained enthusiasm.

Any first-century farmer knew that they needed their seed to take root, grow, and not die along the way if they wanted to eat. You did not feed your family by wasting good, valuable seed. But Jesus describes God’s love for me, for you, for all people, in this way.

God is lavish with his love. He scatters his grace and love with unrestrained enthusiasm on people we would never bother with, in places we avoid. He lavishly throws his love on all people, the hard soil, the rocky ground, among the thorns. That is the enormity of God’s love for all of humanity.

Some of the seeds fell along the beaten-down public footpaths. The seeds had no chance to get into the ground and take root before the birds came and ate them up. Some of the seeds fell on rocky ground with shallow soil. The crop grew quickly but soon withered away because there was no room for roots to grow. The seeds that fell on the thorns were soon suffocated and killed by the thorns.

But then there was the rich, deep, well-prepared, fertilised, watered soil. I don’t know about you, but I find myself drawn to the fertile, good soil when I read this parable. That’s me, right? Let it be me, Lord! I don’t want to be like those with beaten-down, hardened hearts. Or those over there, with hearts full of thorns and thistles.

It’s so easy and so tempting to view others as those with hard and rocky and shallow soil. Throughout Christian history, churches have put their best foot forward in arguing that *they* are the ones with the rich, good soil. And they have argued why those over there *obviously* have the hard and rocky soil, with thorns to boot. This is a particular temptation for churches such as ours that historically would orient towards guarding orthodoxy. This, however, can very quickly suffocate God’s work among us.

As Leslie Newbigin says, ‘For many whose hope it is simply to believe, teach, and confess in service to the Gospel and our Lord Jesus Christ, there is a haunting fear that around any corner, there may be someone lurking, seeking to castigate them. They fear having crossed some unknown line that marked the boundaries of

an apparent orthodoxy, which now functions to mark them as some kind of heretic, exiled to the island of the irredeemable.'

When I reflect on this parable about all the different soil types that Jesus describes, it suddenly hits me. This parable is about *me*. This parable, *all of it*, describes *my* heart. There are parts in our hearts that are hard and rocky, shallow and thorny. But there's also that good soil that Christ has cleared, turned and cultivated.

So which am I; are you? A Pharisee or a disciple? An angel or a *hell's* angel? A sinner or a saint? Scripture's answer is a frustrating 'yes.' And don't be scandalised by this, as Patrick Oliver says, don't be scandalised by your broken and incomplete and sometimes dissatisfying nature, because it's the only kind of world that God has ever loved.

As I said at the online Ministry Summit in March, we can so easily shake our heads and point fingers at the world. But then we forget that: 'For God so loved the *world*.' John 3:16 does not specifically say the church, or God's chosen ones, or card-carrying, dinky-di, true blue LCA Lutherans of northern European descent, preferably with a Finnish surname (or German at a stretch). But the *world*.

The church gets blessed and loved by God, of course. But I think behind these words 'For God so loved the world,' is the fact that when God looks at people, to God, we are human beings before we are anything or anyone else. And as a church, through our congregations, parishes, youth and young adult ministries and many aged-care, community services, schools, early childhood centres and many other agencies, we are connected to human beings; real flesh and blood human beings, *every day*. This is our world. And God *loved* this world. He loved this world so much 'that he gave his only Son.'

God loved this world so much that he now invites us to sing his song, as Psalm 137 says, in what seems to many from inside the church, as a 'foreign land.' God gives us the same invitation as he gave the Israelites who were exiles in Babylon. The Lord's song remains. It is still in people's hearts and on their lips. While the land is foreign, the Lord's song is pregnant with familiarity. It is sweet on their lips, and it rejuvenates their hearts.

'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Ps.137:4). The word 'how' portrays a desire to learn. It's an incarnational word. It's a missional word. It asks how the saving message of the Lord's song might be sung in a way that even the captors and enslavers of the Israelites would taste its sweetness. There are many links and synergies with this narrative for us. The church's place in Australia is vastly different from even two decades ago. It feels like a foreign land to many, and hence, God is also inviting *us* to learn to sing the Lord's song in a new way. Let us hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church.

So, this morning, Christ comes as the farmer in the parable of the sower. He walks among us; he walks among all of humanity. He walks the streets, highways and byways and scatters his love, grace, and mercy with wild abandon. He scatters his love and grace and mercy on a child by the baptismal font, on those Christians lining up right now, across this country of ours, to receive the body that was broken for us; on those waking up in mansions and on those sleeping rough in the long grass.

We are all broken; that is what unites humanity. But what unites God *with* humanity is the brokenness of Christ. The brokenness of Jesus is the healing, the making whole of the world. The bread is broken to create the unity of communion between broken humanity with the divinity of the broken Christ.

We come to the table with our wounds. And we face the fact that we are of hard and rocky and shallow soil, as we walk in the wilderness of our dark night of our soul, as our place at the Lord's Table remains empty, like that of Judas. And we are of the good and fertile soil that Christ continues to cultivate, as God's sinner-saints gather, week after week, to be fed and filled.

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