



Flowers in the Cracks

16 July 2017

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Genesis 25:19-34

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html



Over the last few years in Christchurch we've all got very used to looking where we're going when we're in town, navigating our way through roadworks, traffic cones, cracked pavements, street and building repairs. But amidst the dust and debris and rubbish of the rebuild, one of the joys is finding little bits of evidence of the life of nature that keeps on persevering through all the upheaval. I love it when you see plants holding on tenaciously high up on the sides of fenced off buildings, or flowers pushing through cracked asphalt or broken concrete. It's a reminder to us of life going on, that whatever nature has thrown at us, as Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, in his poem 'God's Grandeur': 'for all this, nature is never spent; there lives the dearest freshness deep down things'.

I think this is the message to me of the Parable of the Sower – of God's faithfulness, and never-ending provision which provides hope for the future.

Today we begin to hear the 3rd great discourse of Matthew's gospel, called the Parables discourse, as Jesus paints vivid pictures of the character of the reign of God, or as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of heaven.

We hear today the Parable of the Sower, familiar to so many of us from childhood Sunday School stories, and then secondly, Jesus's interpretation of the parable to his disciples. What our lectionary misses out is the piece in-between where Jesus' disciples ask him, Jesus, just why do you speak to the crowds in parables when you teach anyway? And beneath this is the question they're *not* asking – wouldn't it be easier if you just said things plainly and simply so we'd get what you're on about straight off, rather than going all round the houses and us losing the plot on the way?!

But what Jesus is doing in telling parables from everyday life is spinning a good yarn, but always encouraging people to reflect further on what he's saying. His parables are so often open-ended, with an unfinished ending so the crowds are left to consider, what happened next? Or perhaps they have an abrupt shock twist to the tale in them, which turns people's expectations of a character or situation upside down. Jesus teases, mystifies, risks shocking and alienating his hearers, but all in the cause of encouraging them to enquire further, to consider Jesus' claims, to make a choice for or against him.

And for those who seek further, like the disciples, the mystery is that more is revealed, they come to a deeper understanding, a deeper relationship with Jesus, a place where they realise they are now in it so deep with him that there's no turning back.

The parable of the Sower then is really the parable supreme *about* Jesus' teaching in parables and how his word is received, and ultimately about how he, the Word made flesh, is received or not by those to whom he came.

It was Joachim Jeremias, the German New Testament scholar who in his seminal work, *The Parables of Jesus*, in the 1950s noted the difference in tone between the *actual* parable of the sower, which focusses on the sower tossing the seed to the four winds with reckless abandon, and the *interpretation* of the parable which is much more concerned with the different types of soil where the seed lands, and how receptive they are.

Jeremias felt the parable itself was original to Jesus and emphasized the abundant grace of the Kingdom of God, so much so that it could just about be called the Parable of the Prodigal God. But he felt the *interpretation* of the parable, focussing on the soils, was most likely Matthew's attempt to apply this parable to the situation of his community, where believers were struggling to hang on to their faith in the light of small numbers, people falling away, challenges and temptations from outside. Hence the interpretation of the imagery of the birds, the shrivelled up seed, the thorns and rocky ground.

Following on from Jeremias, it's often thought that this is Matthew's attempt to explain the quandary his community were wrestling with, that not everyone accepted Jesus' message, and particularly not all the Jewish community had accepted him. They are struggling with that old chestnut, the paradox of divine calling and human responsibility. Just how much choice and free will do people have in their response to God? Last week the focus was all on God's grace and Jesus' call - Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden (Mt 11).

This week the focus, at least of the interpretation of the parable, is what sort of soil are you? Are you open to hear and receive the word of God or are you being choked by the 'cares of the world and the lure of wealth'? perhaps those things don't change over two thousand years!

I think I can recall at Sunday School being challenged about what sort of soil are you? And perhaps we surreptitiously put people we knew into the different categories of whether they were rocky ground, or taken out by birds or thorns... it's a bit like the portrayals we had in our reading from Genesis, starkly polarised characters of Jacob and Esau, younger and older, homebody and hunter-gatherer, devious and cunning as opposed to gullible and easily outwitted.

Whereas perhaps as we've gone on in life, we may have realised that rather than falling into one category or another, our lives may be quite a patchwork terrain of receptive soil, and some rocky or thorny patches, a bit like my garden! And soil conditions can change over the years, as we seek to work together with the gardener of our souls, to change the image slightly. So let us be encouraged, for do you notice that Jesus is not into soil testing?! The sower is not at all concerned with the viability of the soil but just gets on with putting it out there, relying on the fact that the seed has within it the power of new life and new creation, and so there will be a harvest. And not just a measly effort, rather a superabundant harvest reflecting the extravagant love and grace of God towards God's creation, thirty, sixty, one hundredfold. Apparently a tenfold yield was considered a good harvest, so 3, 6, 10 times that was simply out of this world, a bountiful harvest beyond all expectations.

It's been suggested too that good things can come even from the seeds that were supposedly wasted, producing what has been rather beautifully called "collateral blessing"¹. We're so used to hearing that euphemistic term collateral damage, but let's consider for a moment collateral blessing.

Birds eat the seed and spread it, as I found when I parked my car under a tree the other day! Seeds that wither and shrivel up become part of the mulch or compost which provides the incubator for other seeds to grow. Thorns usually meet their comeuppance when they're pruned back, but in a poignant image, became the crown of a crucified Sower².

And so the Sower continues to cast out the seed of the kingdom of heaven in all directions, taking the risk of letting loose the love and grace of God in a world that responds with all sorts of levels of receptivity or none, at all ages and stages. But to those who are open to receive the seed of the word of God, more is given, growth comes in knowledge and love, and out of that comes fruitfulness.

I want to end with a little blessing I came across called the 'Blessing Between the Cracks'³, by Neil Paynter of the Iona Community, and it is my prayer for us today: 'May you always notice the dazzling, beautiful flowers growing up between the cracks, and may your road be full of little resurrections'. Amen.

¹ Brian Hiortdahl, Living by the Word, Christian Century, July 10, 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Burgess, Ruth (ed.) A Book of Blessings. Wild Goose Publications, The Iona Community, Scotland, 2001, p. 112