

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 10 JULY 2011

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Matthew 13: 1-9; Romans 8: 1-11

“Fertile Soil for God’s Kingdom to take Root”

Usually the Parable of the Sower is read with the explanation following it in verse 18 - 23: *“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart. That is what is sown on the path. As for what is sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But for what is sown on the good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”*

Scholars agree that this explanation is of a later date and does not come from Jesus, but was added by the communities of the early Church. The explanation does not appear in the gospel of Thomas, a version of the gospels that tends to list the sayings of Jesus much more cleanly and without embellishment of story. This gospel leaves the interpretation open, and suggests that at one stage, there may have been room for other interpretations than the one the canonical gospels give us.

What we know about the communities in which Mark, Matthew and Luke are written is that they were a young, enthusiastic missional environment - impatient and disappointed with the lack of progress in their mission effort. They wonder why the gospel that changed their life did not take root in the life of others more? Is the evil one at work? Do others lack the resilience to stand against persecution? Is it the cares and lures of the world that simply choke the word?

For them the parable offers an explanation why only a limited number seem to really be able to receive the word and bear fruit. And that when they do, the effect is truly miraculous.

It is easy to transfer this interpretation to our time and our Church. We can see how others come up with seemingly better offers, how it proves too hard for some to stand up to the pressures of a secular society that ridicules our faith, or how the lures and wealth of the world choke the gospel from willing hearts and minds.

For the “bearing fruit hundredfold”, in a Uniting Church context we would probably look for output in the sense of social justice and community building as indicator of fruit bearing. And then we have something to be proud of: the Uniting Church is the biggest provider of care in the country, way ahead of the Salvation Army and other similar institutions like Anglicare. The Uniting Church is well represented in any social justice debate and supporting the poor and disadvantaged in society and the world with well thought out and effective programmes.

In the more evangelical churches the numbers of people brought to Jesus would probably have greater weight, and if we were to look at bearing fruit in that way, the Uniting Church would look a lot less favorable. But as Uniting Church people, we all agree, don’t we, that living the gospel is, in the end, not in the numbers, but in what we *do* and more specifically in what we *do for others*.

So, interpreting the parable in that way, we can feel safe. In our Church, the seed is clearly not falling on the path, or on the rocks, but bearing fruit. Perhaps not hundred fold, but would it be too presumptuous to claim we are bearing 30 fold fruit?

Now let us listen to the original parable without the interpretation we all know so well and is so easy to apply in a way that makes us feel snug, safe and proud. We may not represent the most glamorous of Church contexts but we are at least bearing fruit. With us the seed is not falling on paths, rocks or amongst the thorns.

If we read the parable - without the explanation that was added to the original parable by the early Christian communities - the meaning subtly changes. There is no judgement on those in whom the word does not take root and does not come to bear fruit. The parable as it is presented by Jesus becomes more of an observation of the facts of life. There is less frustration in it and more room to move.

Some seeds fall on the paths and the birds come and pick them up, some fall on rocky soil where they don't have much soil, and they wither away when the sun rises since they do not have much depth of soil. Others fall among thorns and the thorns grow and choke them. Yet others fall on good soil and bear fruit, hundred, sixty or thirty fold.

I don't know how difficult it is for you to let go of the traditional interpretation for a moment and look at what Jesus said with fresh eyes. But let's try it.

Some seeds fall on the path, some seeds fall on rocky ground, some fall among thorns, and some fall on good soil... That's how life is, that's what the reality of the farmer is, that's the reality anybody who would have tried growing something, then and now, would have known.

In Jesus' day land would often be let to lie fallow for a while between crops, with paths crisscrossing the field by the time the sower came. Rocks were very difficult to remove and would keep surfacing. The scorching mediterranean sun was forever killing young and vulnerable plants that hadn't had a chance to take root enough or didn't have enough top soil to take hold of.

And, without spraying, weeds were everywhere. Any of you who have tried to grow organic vegetables will know this: leave it, even for a couple of days, and the weeds will take over! Making it impossible, in some cases, to decide which is which and what is what.

Let anyone with ears listen!

At this point in his career, Jesus is talking to great crowds. They have pushed him off the beach into a boat, so many are there! All potential good soil for the seed to be sown in.

Read against that backdrop that the parable is not an expression of frustration and perplexity about the lack of success of the Church's missional work, it is a question, a challenge, to a great mass of potential followers gathered on the beach to hear and take the parable to heart.

Let anyone with ears listen!

They all know that tamped down paths are part of any field that has lain fallow for a while, and you'd only be very lucky if your field was spared rocks and thorns. In his time bearing fruit a hundredfold is impossible, sixty highly unlikely and thirty something to dream of in a very very good year. Those are the facts any sower has to bear in mind and any person of Jesus' day would have

known.

Looked at it in that way in the parable, Jesus recognises that although he may be sowing his seeds generously and there is plenty of land to sow his seeds, these seeds may not all, and not all with the same ease, grow and come to fruition.

He recognises that as a matter of course there will be things obstructing growth where he sows his seeds, things that will hamper growth and threaten a good yield. In the great crowds that have come to listen to him there are tamped down paths that will be hard to conquer, rocks that will get in the way of roots penetrating deep into the soil. There will be thorns overgrowing and choking all good intentions and initial determination to let Jesus words take root.

They would also all have known that only a good plowing and subsequent tilling of the soil would have made any difference with that. The paths that over the months have developed crisscross through the field need to be plowed under, the rocks need to be removed, the soil turned, the thorns need to be pulled out and here again the soil needs plowing deeply, cutting and churning any remaining roots of thorns that could threaten the new crop until all life has gone out of them.

Let anyone with ears listen!

I believe there is more here for us than simply checking if we are bearing any fruit in our lives and then sit back and relax. I think the parable has more to offer than just that. I hear an encouragement for those who are struggling with tamped down paths, thorny weeds and rocks.

Good soil, to be able to bear fruit, even a little, needs work. If we just leave the word to fall where it will, inevitably it will meet with tamped down paths, shallow rocky soil and thorns. Some will grow, sure enough, but to optimise the harvest there is plowing to be done, stones to be removed, thorns to be pulled out, in our personal lives and in the life of the Church.

There are well trodden paths in our lives that need to be ripped open and turned over to prepare for new growth. The rock hard bits of belief and convictions that have been in our field forever but in fact prevent growth have to be taken out. Other things that grow in our field and choke new growth need to be uprooted. Their stubborn refusal to give up should be met with a matching insistence on growth and change. The change of a seed growing into a plant, coming into bloom and finally bearing fruit before it prepares to die to fertilise the soil for a next generation of seeds and plants.

For those who want to yield richly from the seeds Jesus sows in their lives, there is no such thing as complacency or contentment. No laying fallow. A field that is to yield needs constant work and attention. It needs to be incessantly and determinedly plowed and cleared of anything that may hamper growth.

In a context of a changing, challenged Church and faith, that is a message to take to heart and translate into devoted attention to finding ways of improving the condition of our soil so we will not only bear fruit, but prepare more room in our lives and the life of our Church community for the seed of the gospel to take root and grow.

Amen.