

PENTECOST 6
12 JULY 2020
CAVES BEACH

CHORUSES

NOTICES

CALL TO WORSHIP

We rejoice in God's presence!

Sensed on a sunlit day, reflected in the calm lake, God is with us.

We rejoice in God's presence!

Sensed in the hug of a child, reflected in the closeness of a couple long-married, God is with us.

We rejoice in God's presence!

Sensed in the faith community at prayer, reflected in an unnoticed caring act, God is with us.

We rejoice in God's presence!

Sensed in the living words of Jesus Christ, reflected in those through whom his Spirit moves, God is with us.

Opening Prayer

We are not here, O God, to be preoccupied with our own needs,

but to offer you our thanks and our praise.

We are not here, O God, to prove our own faithfulness,

but to think carefully about how we may proclaim the Good News.

We are not here, O God, to put right what cannot be changed,

but to reflect on the possibilities before us, for wholeness and healing.

We are not here, O God, to dwell on our own shortcomings,

but to remember your love for us in Jesus Christ, and to renew our discipleship. Amen.

HYMN Come down, O Love divine

TiS.398

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God, your word is like a torchlight
that we can use to find our way.

No matter what terrain is before us,
your beam of light helps us to get by.

We have seen what righteous and just living look like
and have chosen to walk this road.

When we come across circumstances that trouble us,
remind us that your Word is life,
and when the way is rough and we feel set upon,
don't let us forget all you have taught us.

Remind us to joyfully praise you
for all the blessings you freely give.

Help us to know your law
as well as we know the lines on the palm of our own hands.

We are the inheritors of a great legacy –
wisdom that is the joy of our hearts.

Forever and always,
may our hearts be set on doing your will.

Gracious God,
are you with us in the everyday complexities of our lives
even when the seeds we sew might only be
the best that are available to us at any given time
and may not fall on perfectly fertile ground?

Are you there if our decisions are poor;
our temptations confound;
our intuition is wrong;
or if we are careless with our family and friends?

(Silence)

God, are you there when the seeds we sow are rotten?
When self-gain and ambition are what drives us;
when we lie without batting an eyelid;

are blind to injustice;
are contemptuous of the poor
and we offer no hope for the future?

(Silence)

God, are you there when we must reap what we have sown?

When the harm is done;
there in the remorse and shame;

in the regrets

or in the contrition and apologies?

God, are you there for your imperfect people?

(Silence)

We yearn for forgiveness and renewal.

Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God is always present in every circumstance,
throwing the seeds of generous love around,
letting them take root no matter the conditions.
There is no place where God will not be present.
Let this be our assurance, let this be our peace.
Amen.

READINGS

- **Roman 8:1-11**
- **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

HYMN Breathe on me, breath of God TiS.407

SERMON

A lot of Jesus' teaching comes in the form of parables. These are stories which were told in terms that the audience that Jesus was speaking to could easily relate and there was usually a twist to the story which brought out the point that Jesus wished to convey. This style of story often leaves some level of doubt as to all the original meanings and the resulting debates have kept theologians in business for subsequent centuries. I think that quite often the parables provoke questions and a level of ongoing discussion which keeps us engaged still today. There is not always a simplistic definitive answer.

This parable is often called the 'Sower and the Seed.' It is one of the few stories where Jesus offers us some sort of explanation of His thoughts behind the story. Even then He doesn't fully explain all of the ramifications of the story. He does give us some detail to work with but if we just sit with that we may well miss what I think is the full depth.

Let me develop our reflection a bit more. Most Biblical scholars think that the part which goes into detail about the ground where the seed falls was possibly added much later - well after Jesus resurrection. This doesn't mean that we discount the story as it is true that the process of inspiration and revelation grows as the passages are passed on by the story-tellers and eventually into the written Gospel.

This means that we shouldn't assume that the story that we have today fully exhausts all the possible ideas which Jesus was sharing with his followers. It is likely that the explanation which makes up the second part of the Gospel today was also added later.

One of the reasons why some experts think that the story has been altered is that it is not really a parable but more of an allegory. Jesus did not use allegories.

There are fine differences between the two forms of story telling.

- Allegories are usually straight forward comparisons, like the differing soils in this passage. Everything relates to something else.
- Parables are never fully explainable. They usually have some sort of unsettling twist which can provoke more questions than they start to answer. They are never able to be neatly summed up in a few words.

Listening to this story we can see that the soils more easily fit into the allegory category. There are simply four types of soil and I then naturally relate it to myself.

- How often have I been like the path? Completely impenetrable and not responding to God's message for me?
- Then again, when have I been like the rocky soil? God's word has been unable to make any roots grow as there is so little or no spiritual soil to allow the roots to develop.
- Now how about the overgrown soil? My life is so full of things like money, social standing and lifestyle questions that there is nowhere for God's word to take root.
- Lastly, when have I been like the good productive soil? Of course this leads to self-introspection where I try to work out what I can do to make positive changes so that I can be more constantly like the productive soil.

This is about how far we usually get with this story. But there is another common approach which we all might be a bit reluctant to own up to. We try to apply the same allegorical boxes to other people!

As I hear the story read I tend to think about people I know. Then I think of the different types of soil and put them into categories according to my perceptions. This is often not a positive review by me. It is so easy to judge other people by our subtle standards. Not that I am anywhere near producing the 100 fold harvests referred to in the story.

Like I said last week our automatic judgement of others is almost a normal human pattern. We reassure ourselves and our egos by judging others harshly. If they are the bad ones then surely I am one of the good ones! As good Christians we know what evil is, and it is them! As we so often start with the concept that Christianity is about avoiding evil by being good we so easily put ourselves into that pattern. Some people even judge both themselves and others harshly.

The allegorical style of approach to this story is a good message. It does describe the differing approaches to how we and others respond to God's word. However, if that is as far as we take this passage I think that we are missing an important message.

This parable is often called the parable of the 'sower' but normally we seem to concentrate on the soil and ignore the sower. It is not called the parable of the four soils!

In parables, unlike allegories, there is usually a twist that is slightly jarring to us and this brings out the message for us to contemplate. The description of the soils is very routine. But there are two quirks in this story that we might very easily overlook.

The first one is the final line of the story. Any peasant farmer in Jesus day would have been ecstatic if they had results like this from their grain harvest. Even today our wheat farmers with all their technology, hybrid plants and fertilizers would be rejoicing to have just such a return on their efforts. Let alone all the efforts that go into pest control and specialised harvesting techniques.

The second quirk would have been very obvious to the peasant farmers who would have been among those people whom Jesus was addressing. The person distributing the seed must be a complete idiot! No attempt was made to prepare the field for the seeding. There was no effort to remove the weeds and the rocks. He doesn't even take care to avoid the paths where the birds can so easily feast on the precious grain. It looks like less than 25% of the grain ends up where it should be!

Can you see where I am going here? Most parables can be read in such a way that people have their perceptions simply reinforced. However if we consider the provocative twist it can lead us into a completely different direction. If we only think about the four soils we just reinforce the way we always thought about this passage. We keep dividing people into the good and the bad. The better and the not so good.

When we start to look at the story focussing on the sower throwing seed everywhere we have the opportunity to view things differently. There seems to us to be a reckless waste of good seed. This seems to suggest that we have, in our God, a reckless tendency to shower blessings everywhere regardless of the merits of the recipients or their failings.

Who would want to show mercy to:

- the worthy and the worthless;
- the recalcitrant and the seekers;
- the loving and the unlovable;
- the responsive and those who reject love;
- those who display grace and those who abuse it.

This is a revealing picture of our God. So often we have been shown a God who constantly judges us and tries to determine our worthiness. This is not a God who gives the most attention to the holiest and most deserving. He does not focus on the most productive people at the expense of the others. It is not a matter of seeking only the fruit bearing people. As a simple farmer God does not seem to be a very good cultivator based solely on his seeding methods. At any agricultural business school He would get a failing grade.

We can now start to see a God who has no shortage of blessings. It is a God who constantly gives and gives without limits.

So it is now that we start to see the twist in this parable a little more clearly. It undermines our preconceived ideas about the 'status quo.' As we tend to judge and divide people by our measures this story highlights God's approach. God turns our habits on their heads. God's grace defies all our boundaries and divisions and floods the universe with a scandalous and overflowing generosity.

This approach then leads us to need to completely review our previous erroneous ideas about who God is approaching. Instead of concentrating on the soils we need to focus on the question of whether I am sharing this love with people regardless our perception of their responsiveness and worthiness. I can no longer discriminate based on my previous ideas about soil types.

Finally we come to the absolutely amazing idea of productivity beyond our imagination. While we might contemplate the foolishness of the sower we can now see that this distribution is rewarded beyond our comprehension. The bounty is rewarded: "some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

I believe that Jesus is saying that our investment in the life of a Christian giving to the world can be exponentially responded to. It is not a matter of making 'sound' judgements based on the experts telling us who to focus on. We need to be indiscriminate in our sowing of the message. It is not just a matter of strategically determining the best results for our efforts. We need to reach out in a non-judgemental way abandoning our fixed ideas about who is worthy.

HYMN 158 God has spoken by his prophets

PRAYER FOR OFFERING

Loving God,
take these seeds of hope
and plant them in places that need them.
Open our eyes to see the harvest
of goodness and justice that they will bring. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

God of generosity,
as we live in this world we see things going pear-shaped:
injustices that punish the defenceless;
decisions that disadvantage the poor
and words that hurt the vulnerable.
We realise you place in our hands seeds
that can turn these things around.

May we plant peace in places of turmoil and conflict.
May we offer real alternatives to feuding and rivalry
as we live in your way of justice and righteousness.
May we plant compassion in places of despair.
May we be ready to offer acts of kindness to people in need.
May we plant hope in places
where hope has worn thin.
May we offer a place of safety
for those who feel vulnerable
and encouragement to those who have lost heart.
May we plant real seeds in the degraded earth,
nurture them until they take root
and grow into forests and grasslands and bushland
that ring with the trilling of birds and the scuffling of echidnas.
Make us generous with your seeds of life.
Encourage us to hurl them around with great abandon,

at all times and in every place.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN And can it be that I should gain TiS.209

BENEDICTION

Let us go to be people of generosity, who,
with great abandon, throw and sow seeds of goodwill,
kindness and peace wherever we travel.
May the seeds we sow grow and multiply
to become flourishing fields of generous communities
who bring hope, peace and joy to the world.

Let us dwell in the abundant love of God,
the generous grace of Christ
and the rich purpose of the Holy Spirit. Amen.