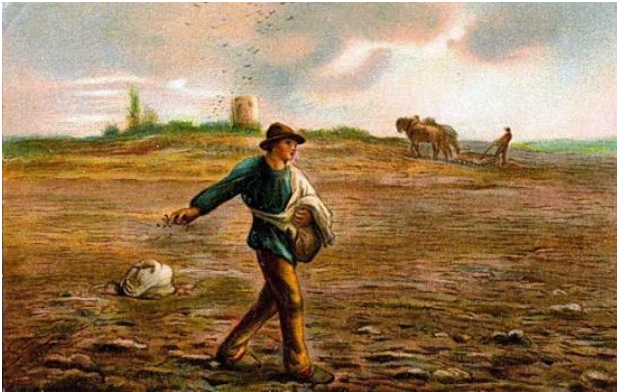


High St Uniting Church

The Sower

Matthew 13:1 - 9, 18 - 23



Three clergy from different denominations were discussing their differences when the subject of offering came up, and how they work out what goes to the work of God and what is kept by the church. One minister says, “Well, we have a carpet in the vestry with a big circle on it. We throw the money in the air and what lands in the circle we keep, and what lands outside the circle, goes to God”. And the

second minister says, “We have a similar system, except it’s a circular table, and what lands on the table is for God and what lands on the floor is for us.” And the third minister says, “Our system is much simpler. We throw the money in the air and what God wants he keeps, and what lands on the floor, is for us”.

There’s not a lot of difference between a modern structured joke and many of the parables Jesus told. The set-up, the extension, and the punch line; all for one purpose and one message. Now, if that joke, I just told, was a parable, what title would you give it? The parable of tithing? The three greedy ministers? And what title would someone give it, who didn’t know how churches really organise their finances? The parable in today’s gospel is usually called the Parable of the Sower. But the explanation of the parable might lead you to call it the Parable of the Seed or the Parable of the Soils. For the original hearers, it would have been like that joke I told – a set-up, an extension, and a payoff. The payoff of the parable is not about the seed landing in the wrong place but the high yield from the ‘good’ soil.

You couldn’t accurately describe 1st century Palestinian farming from this parable. Yes, there was a person who manually threw the seed around, but the proportions of seed landing in different places would make farming totally untenable if they matched what the parable says. In real farming, it would be a little bit falls on the path, a little bit falls in areas with other seed or in rocks, a little bit goes outside the field into bushes, but the vast majority, if the Sower knows his stuff, goes on the good soil of the field. That is what tells you that is a parable, and not an allegory as the gospel writers try to make it with the explanation in the second part of today’s reading. The one clear point of this parable is to spread the gospel message as far and as wide as you can. Yes, there will be opposition, yes there will be people who don’t get it and don’t follow, yes there will be those who seem to get it but then fall away, but when the gospel message is heard and understood, the ‘fruit’ for the kingdom will be overwhelming. It’s not so important to know why some people don’t hear the gospel, or why others hear but don’t follow, the point is hope. God will produce the growth in the right places and to an extent that will surprise you, you just sow the seed.

The section left out of today’s Gospel, describing why Jesus spoke in parables, tells us that parables are meant to engage the mind. To make us think. The presence of the allegorical explanation makes me wonder if the early church found the parable too hard, even when they did think. The parable itself sounds like an authentic Jesus parable, and its preservation speaks of its importance. But the Gospels that preserved this parable also preserved the

allegorical explanation as well. Maybe mission in the Early Church felt like most of the seed was falling on the path, or in the rocks or being strangled by weeds. They weren't seeing the hundred-fold increases and needed the allegory to help them make sense of the parable in their experience. The sad part of that is that following the allegory, in preference to the parable, will get you distracted from the point of sowing by the losses to the birds and the rocks and the weeds.

Following the allegory leaves you thinking that you must go looking for the 'good soil' or chasing strategies to counter the failures. After all, that is what has happened with farming techniques over the centuries. And it is certainly the way that businesses work; targeting their marketing and products to those who will yield the best return. The parable says throw the seed, even if you know that some will be wasted. Listening to the allegory, you could get distracted by looking out for the allegorical 'weeds and thorn bushes' that will strangle the new believers and then developing strategies and studies. There is a place for understanding that the gospel will be problematic for some people, there is a place for tailoring the message for certain types of meetings and audiences, but the main point of the parable is still that we are called to spread the gospel as far and as wide as we can and leave the growth to God.

Parables resemble jokes because there is something natural and attractive about the story structure that draws people in. And parables, like stories are important because they make you think, sometimes long and hard, and they create attachment points for people to see themselves in the story. That is why Jesus told stories about common life. God and the kingdom are complex and difficult subjects, and stories and parables are necessary to give some clues and some directions, even though our culture isn't too good with stories, preferring facts and explanations and arguments. When Jesus was asked to explain things, he told parables. And maybe the important part of this parable about sowing seeds is to not give up on telling stories, your story. Some people won't listen, some will get the wrong idea, but for those who do listen, the results can be life changing, not just for the listener but for the many that they go on to tell stories to, who then listen themselves.

I know that many of us take comfort in the quote attributed to Francis of Assisi, "Spread the gospel at all times, if all else fails use words", but there is a place for words and for stories. Not as a last resort, but as a support to our actions. We can get so caught up in downplaying religion and avoiding proselytising that we become nothing more than nice people. We are called to be sowers of the Gospel. Not just nice people, but people who spread the love of God in word and deed because we were captured by someone who sowed the seed in us. So be like the Sower, spread God's love indiscriminately and broadly and leave the response and the growth to God.