

Sunday 9th July, 2017 - 6th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A
Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9,18-30

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Have you ever wondered about the origins of some of the well-known and popular sayings that we use in our everyday language? Things like “there’s not enough room to swing a cat”, or “to gain the upper hand”. I mean, we use them frequently, but I suspect that many of them pass over our heads without much thought, and have become so much a part of our common speech that we give it little thought.

(By the way - there’s not enough room to swing a cat does not have anything to do with animal cruelty, rather it refers to the cramped quarters on a ship perhaps, or in a prison cell, where there simply wasn’t enough room for the one delivering the punishment to be able to effectively swing the cat-o-nine-tails in order to inflict the maximum pain!)

One of the sayings that I was intrigued about was this one - being between a rock and a hard place. Now I couldn’t find any proof of this, but I wonder whether it actually comes from this parable that we hear today, the parable of the sower...

One of the great aspects of Matthew’s Gospel for me is the abundance of parables that are recorded throughout the Gospel. These parables bring alive the message and the good news that Jesus proclaimed, by their simple structure and down-to-earth imagery.

They function to bring understanding to a core message that is deeply and intrinsically true and vital, by the use of everyday language and images.

As they have been described by commentators and theologians, they seek to 'bring alongside' one image in order to explain another.

It is more than comparison, however, and parables have also been called riddle, allegory, and metaphor. They are a means of disclosing or uncovering a new truth, and in their original context they have a meaning for the original audience, as well as unlocking a greater or wider vision of their world as they know it. They are, indeed, powerful tools.

In fact, as one theologian said, as Jesus told them, they were not just charming little stories to illustrate a point. They were rhetorical tools he used, in the way a builder might use a wrecking ball or a bulldozer, to level his hearers' expectations and clear the ground for the new understanding he wanted to put in place.

And so today, we are confronted with such a parable - one of the most famous of all the parables. At first glance, it is what it seems to be - a simple story, based around the everyday practice of sowing seeds.

As an agricultural nation, we can assume that those listening to Jesus would have related strongly to this image. But I imagine, also, that they would have been shaking their heads in disbelief as Jesus told it.

After all, seed was a precious commodity - and here was a farmer who was just randomly scattering his livelihood, as it were, almost wherever he felt like - on rocks, amongst weeds, anywhere...

They must have thought that this farmer was either stupid, or had lost his mind. You just didn't go around scattering seeds like that - no, you had to prepare the soil with fertiliser, make sure that there were no residual weeds, you had to prepare the ground, with furrows ready to receive the seed, and then you watered it and tended it as though your life depended upon it - and it often did.

But in spite of this farmer's seemingly careless and nonsensical actions, the outcome that the crowd expected did not eventuate. It started off simply enough - sure the seed that fell on the path got eaten by the birds - well, what did he expect.

And the seed on the rocky ground sprouted initially, but of course it didn't have enough soil, and it burned - much nodding of heads at this point.

And naturally, seed that was planted among weeds was always going to get taken over - everybody knows that weeds will smother everything else.

BUT, then, the sting: God blesses a farmer like this beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Normally, the farmer who reaps a twofold harvest would be considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would be a cause for celebration throughout the village, a bounty attributable only to God's particular and rich blessing. But this foolish farmer who, in a world of scarcity, casts his seed in places everyone knows is hopeless is blessed by God in abundance: a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed.

The parable is about the Kingdom, above all. We can draw conclusions about Jesus as the sower, the people as the ground, and their fruits as the growing plants, but all the parables are essentially about the reclaiming of the world for the rule of God; about the nature of the Kingdom, and the response that Jesus' proclamation of it meets. In this parable, we learn that God's sowing of the Kingdom through Jesus is casual and wild.

And here's the reason why: Jesus isn't doing anything as predictable as sowing wheat or planting grass. He is trying to sow the Word of God on the unpredictable soil of the human heart.

In many ways, I think, Jesus is stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place! The seed of the Gospel - the message of the Kingdom will indeed meet many obstacles and resistance as it is sown.

A lot of it will fall in places where it never takes root. Some of it will fall in places where it gets a good start but doesn't last. Some of it will fall in places where it gets choked out by competing interests. That's just how it is with ministry. And isn't it the same in our discipleship, too? How sometimes our own best efforts are met with resistance. How sometimes our best intentions are swamped by our own competing demands, and the demands of others.

Yes, I can relate at times to being between a rock and a hard place. And in those times, that is when I give thanks that we have a God who is so incredibly generous, even prodigal, that this seed is scattered far and wide, in places that many would consider hopeless - for it is in some of these places that the best ministry happens, and the most remarkable outcomes are found.

Yes, the seeds of grace fall indiscriminately into the lives of all God's children. The outcome of that gracious sowing will not be immediately known. One never knows what may come of profligate grace. Yet, still, the sower sows wildly day by day, some hear and some are hardened, some see and some are blinded, yet the sower is not perturbed, but sows on and on with gracious abandon.

We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason: They are. They really are. They are as boundless and as limitless as God's love for us - and if we are called to spread them, then let us do it as far and as wide as we are able.

In the name of God, Amen.