

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 5 (12 July)

Matthew 13:1 -9 + 18-23

In a free-thinking and democratic world, if you were to gather a group of people together – for whatever cause – you would inevitably get a full range of interpretation, thoughts and ideas out of those people; the likelihood that each would have a monochrome fixed opinion is pretty low, unless they were representative of a totalitarian despotic ideology. People, for the most part, have a wide range of opinions and ideas even if they are supposed to be 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. Hence, when you gather a group together, you cannot always assume that they are acting or speaking as one.

This is most definitely true in our faith. We all claim to believe in the Christian God, we all listen to the same stories, we all see the same characters, we all receive the same information – how we react and respond to that sameness almost always creates a vast array of ideas, a huge range of interpretation, and a great deal of mixed opinion. Suddenly, this One God who allegedly created the entire universe, and placed His Son upon earth, and bestowed the eternal power of His Spirit over it all – suddenly, this oneness has been overwhelmed by the variations on a theme that history and life has and continues to heap upon it. Far from being united, uniform and uniquely one, we have transformed into a myriad of positions juxtaposed with each other.

How did this happen? How did the originating seed of life, nurtured and developed by the Great Sower Himself – how did this one commodity, as it were, become so varied and complex? And how might its unique richness be restored? And can it even be restored? Has the seed mutated so much that its origin is now lost in the 'mists of time'? How did that happen?

It encountered the reality of life – it encountered the humanity of that life – and it encountered the complexities, both exciting and daunting of that life. Like your own gardens, you can buy a packet of seeds, you can place them into your soil, but until they show signs of growth and ripening, you have no idea or ultimate control over how it will all evolve. As a sower, you sow – and you but wait upon your actions. The seed of God's growth appears to follow a similar path.

My guess is that Jesus used this parable to get across to His audience that, despite the style and nature of His ministry, there will be no guaranteed outcome. There will always be hope – eternal hope that will forever be rooted in the very essence that is God – and 'hope' the word will always be; not the word 'definite' or 'absolutely' or 'without a doubt', or even 'or else' – but 'hope', hope that it will be good, it will be beneficial, it will be rewarding, and it will be of God. The seed in Jesus' story was loaded with all of the latter: goodness, richness, substance and impact, ready and willing and determined to burst out at the given moment.

But Jesus was, I think, also saying that the receiving world, the audience, the characters standing in the path of the seed, were inevitably going to be a vastly mixed-bag of humanity. They were going to be the very gathering that He no doubt had standing in front of Him; they were the people of the Hebrew stories whose fickleness was well-recorded; and they were to be the peoples of

countless generations thereafter. They were, almost certainly, to be the you's and me's of our own world. We forever give thanks for the richness of our human identity, but it comes at a price that we cannot always predict. Governments in history – and those in our present day – have long tried to suppress and control their populations with varying degrees of success, but the hearts and minds that lie within will forever be the unique elements they are – and we should always be relieved to know that.

However, when you have a cause to promote, you want 100% success – and God is no exception to that! His world, His teaching, His ideology, all must have chance to take hold, to germinate, to be nurtured, to grow, to blossom, and to ripen. Success will be measured by the richness of any harvest, be it crops or souls. The visual presence of that harvest, alongside its intellectual dimension, will bring the physical world living proof of success just as any harvest does. The desire will always be for such success to be hundreds of times greater than the original seed – that is how the cause will flourish, that is how the faith will grow. We plant and encourage others around us, and we reap the benefits of their alliance as they sit and pray alongside us. The perfect scenario would have had the seed of our story landing very definitely on the most responsive, energetic and enthusiastic 'soil' it could find. And the story would have ended there.

But it did not, and the challenge for us all is to realise what can and does happen. The variety of humanity already commented upon is happy at times to encounter the message of Jesus. It is often enthusiastic about that experience. It is sometimes open to its influence. And it is extremely weak. Its staying power is shocking! Its sense of focus withering. Its genuineness highly questionable. Its lack of purpose blindingly obvious. How do we counter this? How do we say to these souls: stick with it, be open to it, embrace and absorb. How do we keep the 'show on the road'?

We do most by our own actions, thoughts and purpose. If those on the rocky ground, or those along the busy path, or those tangled up in life's pressures only see a weak, dispirited world where their being has settled upon, they cannot but fail to root – but if they see vibrancy, energy and vision – and more than anything, hope – then the nurturing will have a rich potential. As a parish we missed out on vision in 2010; we made a huge mistake in rejecting the chances we had, and we are now paying for that. But, like any good gardener, you can remedy that. A crop may not have worked in our soil this season, fair enough: so, you should try a new crop, a new variety, a new technique of growing, a new determination – and in that frame of mind, you may just capture a glimpse of a new horizon and the potential for the richest of crops in the time to come.

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