

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Pentecost 3

13 June 2021

Readings: 1 Samuel 15: 34 – 16:13; Psalm 20;
2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17; Mark 4: 26-34.

“Growing into the Light”

An Australian Parable

As many of you know, I grew up on a farm and later in life have returned to farming in a small way with a beef grazing property. Apart from the cattle themselves, one of the major inputs into the grazing venture is the pasture that the cattle eat. This background of mine once caused me to tell a parable to a bishop, which went as follows.

“Bishop, I have been sowing new pastures on my farm of late. Do you know that it takes at least fifteen varieties of grass to make the pasture healthy? I sow seven types of grass and the rest comes up of their own accord – they are often weeds! But some of the weeds (such as thistles and docks) are important to the grass because they have tap roots that bring up nutrients from the subsoil.

Another reason why these many different plants are necessary is because different ones perform better in different seasons and allow the pasture to adapt to a changing climate over time. On the other hand, the most vulnerable pasture is a monoculture, which is that with only one species. A monoculture can be wiped out by a severe weather event (such as drought or flood) or by pestilence (from locusts or mice).

In other words, the good pasture is the one with the greatest diversity and it has a capacity to thrive and adapt because of its variety. The church needs to be the same – a great diversity of people that will allow it to grow, thrive and change.”

It was a simple message to the then bishop: be inclusive, support diversity, and encourage people to grow in their faith and the church will have a future. The bishop responded by smiling politely and changing the topic – he clearly did not want to engage with the idea.

Of course, that is a problem with parables. They are an indirect way of addressing the human condition; and because of their metaphorical nature, can be mis-interpreted or ignored. Jesus had a similar problem.

The Mystery of the Parable

I would like, however, to extend the imagery of this ‘parable of the good pasture’ a little further. Sowing is only the first part of the activity; grasses also need to be nurtured.

Nurturing requires that adequate water is made available by slowing its flow across the land thereby leading to maximum absorption as well as reducing the possibility of soil erosion. Likewise, some destructive weeds need to be removed because they kill or choke out the other plants and suppress their growth. It is also vital that the pastures are not over-grazed because of greed, as this will permanently destroy the paddock by allowing the weeds to dominate.

Finally, part of the pasture needs to be given over to the growing of trees to provide shelter for livestock as well as windbreaks during the dry and windy summer months. What underlies all of this is the principle that good establishment and maintenance practices lead to a healthy and flourishing environment.

But what does this mean? There is a mystery behind the parable. Jesus’ parables were not only quaint anecdotes drawn from life but, more importantly, had a lesson behind them – indeed, a spiritual application. He therefore ‘explained everything in private to his disciples’.

Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, which is the rule of God in our hearts, and encouraged people to join the programme. He did not preach the institutional church and the exercise of political power and control. To be sure, he did not get on all that well with the religious and political leaders – not to mention the lawyers!

A mistake that church institutions sometimes make is to confuse themselves with the view that they are the Kingdom in themselves, and that their ideas, rules, and regulations are the Word of God.

Instead, the important thing about the Kingdom is that it is principally about God coming to us with grace and welcome, not about us fronting God with either a gross sense of entitlement or an obsequious desire for reward. The Kingdom is not a worldly institution but rather is a mystery that lives in our hearts.

So, back to the ‘parable of the good pasture’. It drew its imagery from the pastoral ecosystem and said that the church’s future is to be found in its diversity, its inclusiveness, and its capacity to help people grow and flourish.

Becoming Who we are Meant to Be

While Jesus' parables of the Kingdom focus on our motivations and the things of the heart, they also have a communal application both on the church and the wider community. The two parables from today's Gospel reading talk about potential and what can be achieved when we cooperate with God.

Both the Parable of the Seeds and Parable of the Mustard Seed suggests that God is active even when we are unaware of it and that great things can come from small beginnings. It is a recognition that small and insignificant things can have a big impact on the world. These two parables therefore apply to Jesus himself, and are likewise reflected in the first reading that described the calling of David to be King of Judah.

The parables also apply to the early followers of Jesus, for whom the Gospel of Mark was written. They were a small and insignificant group of believers sometimes confronted by exclusion and persecution. Yet they were called to do great things in the name of Christ.

But there is more! These two parables also apply to us, called by God to live out God's rule in our lives today. Christians may now be a small or marginal group in our society, but we are nevertheless called to make a difference to the world through becoming the people that God wants us to be and by encouraging others to do likewise.

But first we need to focus on God's Kingdom, which unfortunately is too often not reflected in the institutional church. Reform it, by all means, but do not put your faith in an institution when it does not demonstrate the nature of the Kingdom as revealed in Jesus. In this respect, we need to be wary of theologies, ideologies, and practices that cause harm.

Changing the World

As an example, the Government forced the institutional churches to face the Royal Commission into the Institutional Abuse of Children. It was necessary, overdue, and a moment that brought justice to victims. Today we are challenged to face up to the effects of patriarchy in the church, which has disempowered women and caused abuse. And the list may go on.

On the other hand, and more positively, Christians are called to be a means of bringing about the common good in the world around us. This means that we need to seek justice and fairness for all people, regardless of whether we approve of them or not. We should also seek to uphold the dignity of all people so that there may be mutual respect. To this end, we have an interest in the following current issues:

- Protecting the environment in a time of climate change,
- Supporting refugees and asylum seekers (including the Murugappan family, at great expense languishing in detention on Christmas Island),
- Seeking reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters, and
- Ensuring that all people live with respect, free from persecution or abuse.

St Paul reminded the early church that the followers of Jesus are a new creation. Through confession and reconciliation, we have the capacity to leave behind past failings and grow into the people that God wants us to be. It is a choice, but we are not abandoned in the process because God sends us the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us.

St Paul therefore wrote to the Christians in Corinth that “the love of Christ urges us on” to be renewed, to be faithful, to be fruitful, and blessed, so that we (that is the sacred ‘we’ in all our diversity) may find resurrection in our lives and be a blessing to others.