

PLANTING, RESISTANCE, PERSEVERANCE AND GROWTH

Mt 13.1-23 Is 55.10-11 Rom 8.18-23

Welcome once more to our ongoing virtual celebration of Eucharist, as we continue precautions, whilst the risks of coronavirus are ongoing, and increasing, if anything, no end yet in sight yet, unfortunately, with new outbreaks in Melbourne, including our local region. The contagious nature of this disease is unheard of, but real. And so for another 6 weeks of 'lockdown'. But nice words aren't sufficient. We need to be people of action, even if right now limited to a degree of inaction, yet maintaining patience and hope.

When life is going smoothly for you and me, we can tend to take things for granted, including family and friends. Right now, we are focussed on safety and a degree of anxiety about what is going on in our surrounds and our world. We can feel sorry for ourselves, and feel envious of those who haven't had to face up to the experience of this present sort of plague. Yet we are all in this together, as they say! We think we are hard done by, having this shutdown of normal life, not able to socialize as we are used to, come to church, school, play sport and travel freely, even now not even able to across state borders, to name a few, such that Victoria could be called the 'Pariah' State, and Melbourne the isolated city! Patience, compliance and perseverance are necessary.

Yet, let's look at the 20th century. I read recently an article reflecting on a hypothetical person born in in Australia around 1900, not having a great time of it along the way, growing up during World War I, then the roaring 20's followed by the Great Depression, the darkening 1930's of Fascism, Nazism and anti-Semitism, leading into World War II, the recovery of the somewhat insular 1950's, along with the nuclear shadow of the Cold War, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the late 20th century genocides and regional wars in the Balkans and Rwanda-Burundi, to name just a few humanitarian disasters, causing terrible, often unnecessary human suffering. And let's remember, too, that much of the hostilities were between so-called 'Christian' countries. Well might we ask, where is the Gospel of Jesus in all this mess and misunderstanding?

Yes, then there were great medical and technological advances, with improved health and life expectancy (but we can't eliminate, ignore or deny our mortality!), travel, computing, communications and space travel, and the hope of peace with the United Nations in this ever shrinking world, somewhat frozen at the present time. Increases in human understanding and co-operation also evolved in many positive ways, so it was not all dark, but hard times are real, daunting and challenging. It's a complex but wonderful world in which we live, of which we are all part, and for which we are all responsible to respect, protect and to make a fruitful contribution.

Now, in leaping from Jesus' call last week to open-mindedness to his message, to think for ourselves, and to have our burdens eased by living faith in Jesus, we miss out on some good stuff, with Jesus breaking the religious rules by picking wheat and eating the grain, then healing the man with a withered hand and driving out demons from the blind and dumb man on the Sabbath, focussing on 'family' being broader than immediate relatives, winding up once more the Pharisees and other self-righteous types, all worth a passing mention, in my opinion, and so I do! Human considerations and the common good always come before the letter of the Law, when it comes to Jesus. Too often we can forget that ourselves.

Jesus' preaching and teaching today is right at the centre of Matthew's Gospel, where he moves into a boat (*which an Anglican priest once did at Manly Beach for a Sunday service! I wasn't game to try, concerned about being drowned out by the surf, perhaps, or falling out of the boat, given my lack of balance!!*) to using parables in a change of style, to illustrate his proclamation of God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace. He takes a very down to earth (*literally!*) agrarian example of the grain of wheat being cast around with the hope of growth and productivity, but with the random possibilities of landing in different environments.

We are all familiar with the *magic*, or wonder, of nature and growth, and how the grain of wheat has to break open and be transformed, in the dark but nutritious, nitrogenous earth, into the productive plant, resulting in the harvest. Along the way, in the process, however, there can be all sorts of obstructions. At least the birds of the air could benefit from the grain on the surface, but land in Palestine was rocky, the topsoil was thin and the thorns a reality, in constricting growth, so the hearers could relate to the imagery used by Jesus. The warning is repeated that one can be too concerned and distracted by the temptations of wealth and material goods, but all the same, not denying that we are physical beings with material, psychological and emotional needs, that need to be satisfied as well as acknowledging the spiritual dimensions of our human nature.

I don't often refer to the Second Reading, as it's usually an extra, not necessarily connected to the Gospel of the day, but Paul today is a little too emphatic about not having unspiritual interests. We all need more than a few, even if it may be football, rugby, music, art, crosswords, jigsaws or whatever! We can't just be ethereal with our heads in the clouds, but rather, need to keep our feet on the ground!

Scripture scholars surmise that Matthew was writing at a time when there was considerable hostility and conflict around and within the early Christian communities for which he was writing, and so saw this parable as a reminder to concentrate on the words of Jesus about perseverance and practice. There would always be troubles and some sort of misunderstanding and even persecution despite the inherently positive nature of Jesus' message. Of today's Gospel reading, Brendan Byrne SJ states: ***“When the word finds a generous response in the human heart, there is no limit to the riches of God's love and grace that can be channelled through such persons more widely into the world. So the disciples – and, following them, teachers, preachers, catechists and all concerned with the proclamation of the word and its understanding – should not lose heart.”***

Diversity is acknowledged as well, with not everyone able to be as productive as each other, but the responsibility remains to use our God-given gifts, working together, to build the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. He once again calls us to think for ourselves in applying his teaching to the way we live our lives, producing the fruits of the Spirit. Donald Senior speaks of the disciple as the person ***“who hears the word and understands it, along with bearing fruit and yielding a good harvest according to one's capacity”*** depending on one's age and stage of life.

These are words of hope and encouragement from Jesus for all of us in troubled times, as we go forward with considerable uncertainty and angst, but hope and good will and perseverance.

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