

Year A

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Harry Truman enjoyed telling a story about the man who was hit on the head at work. The blow was so severe he was knocked unconscious for an extended period of time. His family, convinced he was dead, called the funeral home and asked the local undertaker to pick him up at the hospital, which he did. Early the following morning this dear man suddenly awoke and sat straight up in the casket. Confused, he blinked several times and looked around, trying to put the whole

thing together. He thought, "If I'm alive, what in the world am I doing in this soft, satin-filled box? And if I'm dead, why do I have to go to the bathroom?" Life can be confusing some times! Jesus knew that and so he began to communicate his message with simple stories which were called parables. The stories are simple in that he referred to everyday people and everyday situations that everyone would understand. They are stories that are readily understood on the surface but on reflection are a good deal more perplexing. I know, you might hope it would be simple but unfortunately it's not.

Much depends on the point of view of the interpreter. Where should the emphasis lie and what do the different characters in the story represent? For example, we all have heard of the Parable of the Prodigal Son but we maybe haven't heard of the Parable of the Running Father, have we? Yet, it is, of course, the same parable named after different characters within it. But, the character which we award greatest prominence to, will dictate the way in which we interpret the parable. Now, I am very sure that Jesus would have been aware of this issue and so it may be that he was

intending his listeners to pick up different perspectives from different points of view. In that way the richness and complexity of the parable may delight the hearer and the reader for a lifetime.

We have a similar challenge with our parable today in Matthew's Gospel. We might think that as Jesus has provided a detailed explanation of the parable in verses 18-23 that all the issues are settled. But that is far from the case and it may be the reason why Jesus frequently did not offer an explanation for his parables. He knew that they were open to different interpretations depending

on the view of the interpreter and he was happy to accept that. So what should we call the parable today - the Parable of the Soils or the Parable of the Sower? Jesus, in his interpretation appears to make a great deal of the different soils and so we might be inclined to place our emphasis there; that this is really about the soil. Modern farmers, in our part of the world, will prepare the soil first so that it is ploughed and in top condition to receive the seed. As much time, or more, will be spent on preparation as on sowing itself. Jesus spoke about the good soil and its productivity and so it's natural

for us to reflect on the significance of good soil. And so it appears that the word of God will be more productive with people in certain circumstances and by implication therefore we should be targeting the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ to certain kinds of people. Any organisation or business which is going for growth will target its market. It will do its research and strategically look for the place that offers the greatest chance of success and put all of its resources into maximising the impact.

Some Christian organisations follow this 'business model' in their evangelism.

Specific people are invited to a special event where a speaker will deliver a message tailored to the target group's interests. An attempt will be made to determine how successful the enterprise has been and the figures produced will be presented as justification for another initiative or for a change of direction in the future. It is all very clinical and calculating and makes rational sense. However, I don't think that the parable is advocating that approach at all.

For me, emphatically, this is the Parable of the Sower. It is all about the sower and the

actions of the sower. We might find his actions confusing but that's because we're not familiar with sowing practice in the Holy Land. Much sowing is still done by hand and the seed would be scattered freely and then at the end of the sowing the ground would be ploughed. That seed which fell on good ground would take root well, but the rest would eventually fail. Three-quarters of the seed sown would be lost but the other quarter had the potential to produce a bumper crop.

I don't think there is any doubt that the sower was Jesus and so by implication all

who sow subsequently, do so in the name of Jesus, as his disciples. So, we are being given an insight into what Jesus thought about a targeted sharing of the good news. He didn't think very much of it! The sower is to sow widely and indiscriminately. The purpose of the sower is to sow and not to fertilise the soil. The sower is not to spend time analysing the soil but to get sowing. That way all have the opportunity to receive the word, the good news, and with understanding and perseverance the word might take root and produce effective disciples. It is reasonable to assume that it

is the role of the church to aid understanding and to encourage perseverance. Understanding is not just a brain activity. It is not just the ability to conclude that a concept has been absorbed. I remember at Primary school being asked one day by the teacher to measure the distance of the perimeter of the playground. 'Do you understand what you have to do?', the teacher said to me. 'Yes', I replied. It was easy, you see. I was given a stick that had a wheel on it and after every metre travelled the wheel clicked. All you had to do was count the clicks on the journey travelled

and then you had the distance in your head. The problem is that a young child gets bored walking around a playground counting clicks! I was in a day dream half way round and lost count. So what did I do? I made a number up and of course was found out when I got back to the classroom. I understood what I had to do but I didn't do it. Imagine yourself walking along a railway line and you can see a train coming towards you in the distance. If you do not move aside it's going to run you over. You understand that. What are you going to do? You are going to move away. That's what Jesus

meant by the one who hears the word and understands it. It's acknowledgement and action together.

Persecution and temptation are always present. Persecution is trouble out with. Those things that can bear down us that we're not expecting, like the birds swooping down and pecking the seed. Temptation is trouble within, like the thorns that grow up and choke the life out of the seedling. Both persecution, in its many forms, and temptation are threats that need the remedy of loving support and encouragement to quell. For the bounty of the harvest to be

experienced attention must be given to all of these things.

‘A sower went out to sow’ not knowing the chain of events that would unfold. We just don’t know, but we are called to follow in the footsteps of the first sower. May we sow abundantly and extravagantly. He will look after the rest.