

20140713FifthAfterPentecostSermon

Before I beginning my sermon can I remind you that it is Sea Sunday when we remember those who carry out their business on the waters – fishermen & women, mariners, naval personnel. It is appropriate that in our Gospel reading Jesus climbs into a boat in order to teach. Also can I remind you that where you are seated this morning is called the Nave of the Church – derived from the same Latin word, *Navis* meaning ship – so this morning you are in the boat and I'm up here teaching you. Finally, can I remind you that before the Cross became the universal symbol of the Christian church and the follower of Christ, it was a symbol of a boat which indicated the Christian faith. So, I ask that you keep, as the Psalmist puts it: "... those who go down sea in ship and carryout their business on the great waters..." in your prayers.

You know, I really struggled with this morning's readings because they seem to be so contradictory to what we expect and also what is expected from us as Christians. Because of this they can neither just be left as being self-explanatory, nor glossed over at face value with a few Christian clichés. They require some thoughtful responses from you – the listener. So, in the sermon this morning I'm going to give some background and context to the readings, indicate the difficult bits and then throw out some questions for you to explore in your minds, both here and I hope after you've left here this morning. What I'm not going to do is give you easy answers; tell you directly what you should do or how you should respond. I'm going to leave that up to you.

Next week I'm preaching at St Thomas's as they celebrate their patronal festival. As we all know their patron Saint has been saddled with the nick-name, "Doubting Thomas" but I'm going to tell them that by far a better and more positive name is "Questioning Thomas". I like and admire Thomas because he doesn't take this at face value. He questions and wants to know how and why and what. Because he did that his faith grow, and when appear before him in that upper room he could say, "My Lord and My God." I truly believe that he said this not because he saw the holes in Jesus hands and feet and the wound in his side, but because he had questioned and found within himself the answers to questions that his faith was looking for. I would like you to do the same. Question what I'm saying, explore it, see what it means for you and hopefully you too can in your prayers say to Jesus, "my Lord and my God."

Let's begin with the Gospel. Today's gospel is such a famous parable you might think it strange that I said I struggled with it. Perhaps because it is a so famous, I struggled. Remember, parables are stories with a single message and allegories are stories where each character, object and event has a message or meaning behind it. What happens with today's parable is that Jesus, having told it is asked by his disciples to explain it, which he does. The trouble is he then turns it from a parable to an allegory – given meaning to each object in the story.

If you were to ask me what the message of this parable is, I would say that it presents to us the reason some people have their faith flourishing in them, while others are led astray from their faith or grow and flourish for a short time before their faith fades. Jesus' explanation, as I said turns it into an allegory and gets quite complicated – to such an extent that most commentators believe that the explanation is not by Jesus at all but a gloss or interpretation added by the writer of Matthew's Gospel. Other commentators say that if Jesus has explained it, we needn't look any further. His explanation says it all. Let me re-read his explanation: ¹⁹*When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.* ²⁰*As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;* ²¹*yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.* ²²*As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.* ²³*But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'*

But for me there are still some thorny questions to answer! For instance, who qualifies as "good soil"? Since soil cannot change by itself, is there any hope for the hardened, rocky, and thorny soil?

There are examples throughout Matthew's Gospel of each kind of response to the Good News. The religious leaders of the day, for example, "hear the word" but consistently fail to understand. Even the crowd who listen avidly to Jesus teachings and respond so well to his miracles will turn against him at the time of his crucifixion. Maybe they as Jesus said, never really understood any of it! And the rich young man who finds that he cannot part with all his worldly goods is a great example of how we can be seduced by the things of the world so that our ability to bear fruit can be choked off! Even the disciples themselves are found wanting when trouble comes along.

So what about the good soil? Who are the ones who will hear and understand and ultimately bear fruit? It seems that these will often be the most unlikely candidates; the people that the world does not rate, the goats rather than the sheep, the tax collectors and the prostitutes rather than the respectable. These are the ones that will go ahead of the religious leaders of the day into heaven! And this is borne out in the Old Testament reading about Jacob and Esau but I'll to that shortly.

But what of those disciples? Is there any hope for them? Time and again they are found wanting in understanding, in faith and in courage... but the encouraging thing for all of us, is that Jesus doesn't give up on them. What about the main character in the story, who is the sower? It could be you or me. It could be God. It could be Jesus. The sower scatters his seed (the good News of the Kingdom) generously and seems to waste so much of it on ground that holds little promise of a rich harvest. Looking at the history of missionaries – they often seem to squander so much of their time and resources with little chance of a return but once again we can be assured that Jesus has invested in each one of us as much time as he did with his disciples. He too seemingly squandered his time with all sorts of people, outcasts of all hues and yet the harvest has already been a good one. Surely a great encouragement for us all!

My problem with this parable and Jesus' explanation is that it seems to have an element of predestination in it. Some of us are predestined not to be good soil but to be hardened, rocky, and thorny soil and in the same way that soil cannot change by itself, there is nothing we can do to become good soil it seems to be saying. Mmm, I hope you can see my difficulty and perhaps are thinking of a solution for me.

What is also fascinating is our Old Testament reading about Jacob and Esau. In their cycle of stories in Genesis three motifs are consistently interwoven: struggle, tricks and promise. Even in the womb, as we heard in today reading, Jacob and Esau were struggling with each other, rivals to see who would be born first with all the birthright promises. Remember this story comes from a fairly primitive tribal society where primogeniture (first born male) is paramount. Jacob apparently gets his birth name (Ja'akov means "grabber") in part because he grabbed Esau's leg in the birth canal, apparently in a last ditch effort to be born first himself. Later, as we heard, Jacob attempted to "grab" the birthright from his brother by means of another "trick," offering a meal of stew to his famished brother, fresh from the hunt, in exchange for it.

What is most important is not who is born first. God answer to Rebekah desperate cry as she feels the two struggling in her womb offers no immediate comfort. "Two nations are in your womb, one stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (verses 22-23).

"The older shall serve the younger". This declaration from God is quite subversive. The younger should serve the older according to cultural rules. And typically the one favoured by the father (Esau, the elder) was understood to be the one favoured by God. But this is not the case in this family because God chooses to continue the family line and the promises of land and nationhood through Jacob, not Esau. Since neither social nor religious norms would have allowed Jacob to become the next bearer of God's covenant, those cultural norms had to be subverted so that God's promise could come to pass.

The subversion lies in the very nature of the two brothers. Esau is self-indulgent and Jacob is shrewd. Jacob knows his brother is famished, but will not share his lentil stew unless Esau renounces his birthright. Jacob's wit overcomes Esau's brawn. Esau thus "despised his birthright", placing his immediate physical needs above the values of his family and culture. Equally, it might be said that Jacob despised the nature of the birthright by thinking and acting as if it could be bought or sold, with or without his father's knowledge or permission.

It is also through trickery that enables Jacob to receive his father's deathbed blessing ahead Esau. But what are we to make of all this trickery and deceit that is going on? Are we to approve of it, since in the end it becomes a means by which Jacob ends up receiving the promise? Are we thus to see deceit as part of God's means of subversion of the cultural practice of primogeniture and male headship? Or might we be intended to see that when we take God's promises into our own hands, the result is a dangerous detour? Its back to the God of surprises we spoke about last week.

Or maybe, Jacob's morality isn't the main theme of the story – but commitment to God is. But for me that throws up numerous ethical questions.

Does God sometimes call us to trick others to achieve some greater good? Do ends justify means? What has been your experience in this area? Are there situations where you have believed deceit and lies were the better, if not entirely the "morally upright", way forward?

Or is it the opposite? Does God finds **all** forms of deceit untenable, and so deceit therefore triggers further struggles that destroy our relationship with God? What have you found in your life? How has your relationship with God been affected when you knew you were acting deceitfully?

Or does the Jacob/Esau story simply demonstrate that deceit happens. But God still finds a way to accomplish God's promises? Looking at it this way gets us to a core question of our understanding of God's will and our relationship with God. It also gets at whether we understand ourselves primarily to be enacting God's story as our story or participating in it. Do we believe it is our job to make history come out right? Or is that God's job only? Rebekah and Jacob seem to think it was their job. God, in the Jacob/Esau cycle of stories as well as the parable of the sower, is like a good GPS, simply to "recalculating" all the time when we take the wrong turning so that God can bring about God's promise.

You can see, difficult ethical questions which do not yield easy answers for me and maybe for you too. It brings up so many points that I've made in sermons over the last few weeks. Points such as God being a God of surprises – going in ways we least expect. Such as God controlling our lives.

I usually try to end my sermons on a positive note to encourage you in your life journey. Often I reference something I've said at the beginning of the Sermon to tie things together on a satisfactory note. But today all I can say is I began by mentioning that today is Sea Sunday and that a boat was the sign or symbol of the Christian church in the early days. Perhaps after today's readings we feel all at sea; but our gradual hymn can re-assure us [8am "Eternal Father strong to save ... those in peril on the sea"]

[9:30 So, when our life is clouded o'er, and storm-winds drift us from the shore, say, lest we sink and rise no more, 'Peace, be still' or the anthem

Never weather-beaten saile, more willing bent to shore
Never weary pilgrims' limbs affected slumber more,
Than my weary sprite now longs to fly out of my troubled breast;
Oh, come quickly, Oh, come quickly, Oh, come quickly, Glorious Lord, And take my soule
to rest.