



Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 16 July 2023

READINGS

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Matthew 4:9)

The Sunday’s Gospel reading features some well-known content. According to the Synoptic tradition the parable of the sower is the first parable Jesus tells in his public ministry. Also, within the Synoptic tradition it is offered as a basis for the telling, and interpretation, of further parables.

“Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13)

But the parable’s significance does not end there, for it is framed in what might be termed an explanation of the purpose of the parables in general. In the Gospel of Mark, we read in chapter 4:33-34 that when Jesus spoke or taught publicly, he did so exclusively in parables. But we have heard previously in Mark 4:10-12 firstly, that the “mystery” or secret (Gk. *mysterion*) of God’s kingdom has been given not to everyone, but to the disciples and, secondly, that the ultimate purpose of the parables is to confuse those who hear them, to keep them from understanding their meaning, to prevent them repenting.

These insights, on their own, are somewhat confusing since we imagine that Jesus would have wanted as many people to come to repentance as possible. And yet he chose to convey his message in a form of speech which was obscure and difficult to understand. If we come to the parable itself, its meaning and interpretation, we see at least two things. We see that the “interpretation” of the parable offered in Mark and Matthew (4:14-20) is not the original meaning of the parable but now reflects the context of the early Church and the activity of evangelism. To understand or appreciate its original meaning we must go back to the context of first-century Galilee and Judea.

It is a well-known fact that one of the reasons Jesus’ parables reflect so much agrarian activity is because the society was, in the main, agrarian. Ninety-five to ninety-eight per cent of the total population were engaged in agricultural activity and, the majority of this number were engaged in relatively small-scale subsistence farming. When trying to discern an original meaning for the parable of the sower, we are presented with two interpretational difficulties. Firstly, grain was infinitely precious in antiquity as it literally constituted one’s livelihood. The idea that someone would have scattered grain so liberally and carelessly so as to waste as much as three quarters of his sowing grain in the parable of the sower is absolutely inconceivable. How then are we to understand the sower’s actions?

There is another hermeneutical avenue we can pursue when we understand a bit of the historical context, and when read the parable of the sower in conjunction with another parable, the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-43).

While most of the population would have been engaged in small-scale subsistence agriculture, there was, at the time of Jesus, an ever-enlarging encroachment of wealthy landowners who resided in the urban centres and co-opted labour from the rural peasantry to work their farms. Whereas the rural peasantry would have engaged in polyculture, i.e. farming various vegetables, grains and crops (to mitigate the risk of a single crop failing), the wealthy landowners, who amassed for themselves large tracts of land, engaged in monoculture and often of crops which could be lucratively exported such as grapes for wine, or olives for olive oil.

Such farms were generally exploitative and operated at the cost of the well-being of small-scale subsistence farmers by either demanding inordinate portions of the produce in the form of tax, or through tenancy, or eventually dispossessing the small-scale farmer of his land altogether and forcing him to become a day labourer or an indentured labourer. This whole situation meant that members of the rural peasantry naturally resisted attempts of wealthy land-owning elites to co-opt either their land or their labour and, if the land-owning elite were successful in co-opting the labour of the rural peasantry, the latter usually harboured resentment toward the land-owning elite as a result. This is a dynamic reflected most clearly in the example of the parable of the so-called wicked tenants where, in an act of defiance and subversion, the tenants (members of the rural peasantry) attempt to take back control of the land they formerly owned.

This dynamic, in turn, may help us to understand what might have been an original meaning of the parable of the sower. Sabotage of land was a reality. This is reflected, again, in the parable of the tares or weeds. Here we see a likely disgruntled former labourer, who's family possibly owned the land before it was foreclosed upon, deciding to exact revenge on the wealthy landowner. His choice of method is to sow weeds in the fields in an attempt to spoil the crop. From the work of social scientists and biblical scholars we know that it was not uncommon for such acts of sabotage to be performed by the peasantry. Frequently, they might also abandon the farm of a wealthy land-owner, fleeing to a region outside of their control, while taking some produce with them.

Could then the sower in today's Gospel reading be acting in such a way so as to cause disadvantage to his wealthy overlord? If so, as we see in the parable of the so-called wicked tenants, that there most likely would have been dire consequences.

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Matthew 4:9)