



*The new*SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 15

Isaiah 55:6-11 - Matthew 13:1-23

Men and women are not gods

Today's text from Isaiah is a text for our own times... "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*" declares the LORD. There are two very important elements here for Isaiah. The first one is about the dangers associated with presuming to know and do the will of God. Israel claims that as a nation the Jews are *the people of God*. They are special to God and know the ways of God. But here, the prophet is warning them to go back to basics and renew their covenant lives. They are a people who have compromised the laws of God. They live in the wider world as people of the world and then withdraw into themselves in order to be "faithful" Jews. They want it both ways, to be *like the other nations* and at the same time to be separated off from the world and living the faith of their ancestors.

Men and women need to trust God

This living *like the nations* causes the Jews problems because when their world is turned upside down by politics and economics they have no-where to turn. Hence their time spent in exile in Babylon. They had lost sight of the fundamentals of faith – trust God! This is his second point. Isaiah is reminding them how *my ways are not your ways* and how the difference between God and human beings is a bit like the distance that exists between heaven and the earth.

When in difficult times; when they are struggling and wondering where the light is in a world that seems to have turned dark, they should have turned to God. The reality is that as a nation they should not have been living at a distance from God. Living in God – obeying the commandments and following the way of the Torah – means living in hope, in joy and in peace through whatever is happening to them and around them. Even as they were struggling away in exile in Babylon they should have been able to find the God who was there alongside them. They could *sing the song of the Lord in alien land* because there was no human situation in which God was absent. That is what they had lost.

God is always our hope!

Here is the promise - *it is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty*. This *word* of God was first seen at creation – God spoke and so it was. Nowhere is the Word of God more powerfully evidenced than in the sending of Jesus as the Word of God revealed in flesh and blood, the Son who made his home among us. What Isaiah would be highlighting for our Church today is this need to repent and to return to a Kingdom way of living in the world, a way of "being Church" that aligns with what God wants and not what we prefer and/or what the world will accept. A refusal to live in this alternative and status quo bending way will lead to the Church (individuals and faith communities) finding itself exiled to a modern equivalent of a Babylonian exile. If the Church in Australia is not already in that position, it soon will be. Christians cannot be *like the other nations* if the Gospel vocation is about proclaiming Jesus who is the only Way, the Truth and the fullness of Life.

A sower went out to sow some seeds...

The interpretation of the parable Matthew supplies begins with an emphatic *you*. It has the sense of *you disciples here with me you must yourselves now take note of this interpretation!*

For Matthew, these four kinds of soils exist in the Church and possibly even within the life of individual believers as well. The *snatching away* of the seed from the first soil is an action undertaken by the devil. The person hears the Word but not understanding its full significance, finds faith is quickly taken away by outside factors. These are Christians who are not really Christians because the Gospel is not lived out (the word *understand* here means to take it up and make it the centre of their human living). **The rocky soil** represents those who hear the Word, take it into their lives but do not place it at the centre of their existence. Because it does not go deeply into their hearts; because it is not allowed to penetrate into every aspect of their identity and activities, the initial enthusiasm is soon burned up. These shallow roots are revealed when the person is faced with persecution, hardship, discomfort or doubts because of their faith. The Word of Hope is not enough of a part of their lives to sustain them and they give up on God. The **third soil type** is one with which believers can associate. These people hear the Word, respond to the Word, make it a part of their lives but have not fully repented. They still have in their lives a wide range of alternatives, “words”/seeds to which they turn at various times. They have Jesus *as well as these* other sources of hope. These alternatives are like thorns and weeds, they can grow, spread and displace the Word. The **good soil** represents those who open their lives fully to the Word, receive the Word of Jesus into every part of their being and so produce a rich abundance of fruit in order to feed the world. They are shaped by the Word of Jesus.

Just how much of Jesus can “outsiders” experience through us?

The end of this parable reminds us why this message is of great importance to the life of the Church. It tells us how we are key parts of the work of God in bringing salvation to all the peoples of the earth. It is through us that the “fruits” of his Reign will be experienced and it is through us that God feeds the world with his loving mercy.

This can be a daunting prospect when we look at our own limitations and weaknesses. How could we possibly provide “spiritual food” for others when we are so uncertain about our own holiness? Who are we to be presuming to feed others? The answer in this parable is that it is the *Word that produces the fruit*. All we are being called to do is to (1) hear the Word of God (2) accept the Word of God (3) work on making a part of our lives all that Jesus has taught us and has revealed to us about the will of his Father. What we need to do is to keep Jesus as our model and living and responding as he lived and spoke in the communities through which he travelled. God does the rest. Our task is that of receiving and living. We do that with the help of God through the gift of his Holy Spirit.

At various times, there are parts of all of these soil types in our lives. Sometimes we do resist allowing the Word of Jesus to impact on the way we act in “this” situation or respond to “that” person”. There are also times when the demands of faith are too demanding and confessing that we are followers of Jesus too embarrassing or too risky and so we stay quiet. Of course, each of us has a range of the “thorns” and “weeds” that we leave in our lives that compete with the Word of the Gospel. It is easier to turn to these personal resources, skills, abilities and contacts when we need to deal with life’s challenges than to rely on them before we turn to God. Trust and hope form a part of the bedrock of faith and without trust and hope, love will not be possible and it is this love that is the fruit with which we need to feed the world. We are God’s garden, God’s soil put aside in order that the whole of his creation may be blessed. He will do that – bless the world – through our courage and faith

God’s ways are not the world’s ways – we need to get used to that!

Isaiah and Jesus both remind us that simply going along with the priorities of the world and the ideologies of the world will not make us disciples. The only way for the world to find lasting peace and joy is by coming to the Christ we reveal to them in and through the way we live and act. If that does not motivate ourselves into renewal then nothing will.