



THE NEW SHOFAR

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:9)

July 16th

What we sow in the world around us we will reap

I have little doubt that most of us feel we understand the message of this parable of Jesus. Equally, most of us could agree with this standard commentary...*His clear explanation of what each element in the parable represents would seem to leave little work for the preacher. But the interpretation also raises some troubling questions. For instance, who qualifies as "good soil"? Since soil cannot change itself, is there any hope for the hardened, rocky, and thorny soil? Are these destined to be unproductive forever?* However, there may well be alternative questions that are raised by what Jesus is teaching.

One I have been pondering is the role of the one sowing. I asked a friend of mine about the farming techniques used in each of the examples. The reason I asked this was because so many of the sermons I have heard preached focus on the soil – and rightly so. The parable reminds us of the various ways in which people “receive” the Word when it is proclaimed.

This particular farmer, however, seems to be blind to the absurdity of repeating the same flawed sowing techniques season after season. Logic would suggest that if there are rocks in the paddock that are stopping the seeds from sending down their roots deep into the earth, the farmer would either move the rocks or change the paddock. Why be critical of the paddock for failing to produce that which was impossible for it to produce? Or the birds? Would it not be more productive to do something about the birds while the seeds are freshly sown than blaming the birds for a failed crop? Why not plough the path and block access? Similarly with the weeds. Just pull them out until the wheat has had a chance to grow, to dominate them.

Why is it rarely the “farmers” fault for crop failures?

The causes of the failures of the Church in engaging the world with the Good News of Jesus Christ is too often declared to be “out there” – the world. Rarely do we take seriously enough our own complicity in making the Gospel meaningless, powerless, unattractive and unnecessary. And how good it is that we have an “enemy” to blame for this: we are in the mess we are because of him, her, them of this thing we insist on doing.

I would sing Alleluia for a week if I heard but one parishioner, priest or bishop at least ponder the possibility that doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a new outcome might be more akin to insanity than faithfulness to Christ’s commands. It is pointless casting our seeds into paddocks that have more rocks than soil. A great deal more preparation needs to be undertaken prior to sowing. The farmer needs to learn new techniques, work actively in the soil to better enable it to take the seeds, struggle day after day to keep the scavenging birds away and lazy trespassers from taking shortcuts.

All of that, however, is going to depend on the man’s passion for producing a crop because farming is no easy task, more akin to a way of life than a job. We are going to need to be *living* as “farmers” if we are going to bring the Gospel alive for an unbelieving world.

Do we have the passion required for sharing Christ?

Therein is a significant challenge for the Church today. Its future sits in the hands of each and every baptised member of our faith communities, not matter how large or small these communities may be. The problem cannot be transferred to the world who appears to be rejecting the Christian proclamation. Nor is it that God does not seem to be doing the same kind of miracles today as the world had witnessed in previous generations. Revival, renewal, whatever we wish to call it, depends on us individually and collectively. I am the one responsible for doing what needs to be done in order for my “paddock” to produce the fruit God expects and the world needs. We know our bishops have lost the plot and are no longer listened to and much of their leadership compromised. We know too how a sad percentage of our clergy are lazy, with too many ministering in ways that fit their own personal programmes and lifestyles rather than being shaped by the very people they are called to serve.

But what about me? In what ways am I striving to grow in my personal life in Christ? In what ways am I exploring new possibilities for mission and ministry engaging with those who have need of an experience of God’s love for them? What am I doing for those hated and rejected by the world, those on the margins, the strange, the odd, those who are different and those who keep getting it wrong (in our eyes)?

Jesus made it abundantly clear how those who strived to be true disciples would find themselves on their own Golgothas. The sad thing is that many of those who are doing the crucifying are fellow Christians. We crucify each other in the name of Christ not truly appreciating how this kind of activity merely adds more rocks to our paddocks, makes it more and more difficult for the seeds of faith to take root in the world.

"I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

In Corinthians 3 Paul reminds the Church of how it all works: *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow*. Before there is any growing, there is much work to be done – planting and watering. Here it is where we as Church, fail. Going to Sunday Mass is not about doing missionary things. Participating in Church meetings and gatherings are not going to grow the crop Christ wants. These things are all about growing ourselves, disciplining ourselves and coming alongside of our brothers and sisters in support and encouragement. They are about assisting us in growing in Christ and opening ourselves up to God’s energising grace and power. Real Church only happens when we pass through the church doors and return to the world.

What then is our starting point? Try Paul again...*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's Temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?* We are all we need to be; we have all we need to possess in order to farm the world God has placed into our care. But like all of the ancient temples of the Bible, we can fall down; we can be in need of maintenance; we can even disappear forever. Being a Temple of God is not the same as doing God’s work or being a creature through whom God is working. We can (and do all too easily) turn ourselves, our words and our deeds into temple of the self, a creation in which God has little but nominal input. And, the world starves.

My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways (Isaiah)

Our first reading from Isaiah says all of this so eloquently. If the Word of God “goes out” it will produce much fruit. It will not return empty. God’s word will accomplish all God wants. What

we are asked to ponder this Sunday is whether or not that “word” the world sees us living and proclaiming is indeed God’s. We need more focus on God and not on fragile human striving.