

## Sexagesimae 8 February 2015 St Peters Pretoria

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When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Dear sisters and brothers,

Jesus loved to tell stories to illustrate aspects of the kingdom and the gospel. Sometimes he would tell impossible stories - like the one of the lost son - to illustrate how amazing God’s love is. At other times he told stories taken directly from life - this is how God is!

What about this parable? Does it reflect reality, or is it an improbable event? In my first congregation, Piet Retief, there were quite a few farmers amongst the parishioners, and I noticed that they had problems with this parable. Who would sow seed where it cannot grow?

Well, this parable actually is a good illustration of farming practise during the time of Jesus.

Unlike modern methods that we know, the seed was sown on an unprepared, untilled, field, and only afterwards was it ploughed.

Picture the farmer waiting for the weather to change. Perhaps a twitch in the toe gave him the signal: Rain is coming! The field was dry, with almost no sign of life. But he knew that after the rain it would quickly change.

And so the seed was sown. As the plough followed, the seed was ploughed in. One or two foot paths that crossed the field proved to hard for the plough. The birds enjoyed the seeds that lay exposed there. Or it was crushed by the feet of passing people.

The rain came, and soon the seedlings were sprouting. However, after a few

hot days, shallow soil patches could no longer sustain the seed. The plants died. Other patches obviously contained weed that also was waiting for the rain - and the weed won.

But then - of course, a large portion of the seed grew to maturity and was a beautiful sight to behold, yielding a good crop.

This is the only part of the parable that stretches it a bit. A thirty fold return was regarded as acceptable. Sixty fold was good. A hundred fold was exceptional, a bumper crop!

Therein also lies the clue to the parable - and, in fact, to farming as a whole: any farmer, whether ancient or modern, sows with the hope of reaping a good crop!

What do I learn from this parable?

1. I cannot “test the soil”

In modern farming technology, the soil is prepared and fertilised *before* the sowing. Each kernel is placed into this well prepared soil. Waste is not tolerated.

This all too often is also how we as Christians approach our fellow human beings. We do not want to waste energy where it will not yield results. Therefore we categorise people. The ones that we regard as “hard soil” are pushed aside. They are not interested in the gospel, and we assume that they never will be. When a neighbour, a friend, a colleague, shows no interest in Church and faith, we just assume that it will never change. The thought to invite them along to church, or to share with them the gospel of Christ, is hardly ever coming. “It will be wasted energy!”, we think.

I must confess that I am also very quick to identify the “shallow Christians” - especially when it comes to confirmation class, or the baptism of Children. I assume that most of them will dwindle away after confirmation, that the family that appears to baptise it’s child, will disappear soon afterwards, only to come again a few years later for the next baptism.

Within the congregation we identify the “seed amongst the weeds and thorns” - the passive members, who never participate. We call them “dead wood”, in German “Karteileichen”. Often long debates in congregational

councils ensue, discussing how to get rid of them.

We tend to focus all our energy on the “good soil” - the active, participating members. As a result, congregations become closed communities that are comfortable within themselves, and amongst themselves. Without exception, such congregations shrink over time, until nothing is left.

We need to learn from this parable, that we cannot see what is under the surface. In this regard, the position of the parable in the gospel of Luke is important to consider. The previous chapter tells us about interaction of Jesus with the devout, religious Pharisees and Scribes - people that would, by our standards, be regarded as good soil - and how they reject the Word of Jesus. It shares how even John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for Jesus, doubts whether Jesus is indeed the Christ.

Dear congregation, as tempting as it might be - let us not fall into the trap to focus our energy only on what we regard to be the good soil. Like with the New Testament Farmer the seed needs to be sown generously, because we cannot look beyond the surface. We cannot say what will happen after the “Rain of the Holy Spirit” has fallen.

We should trust in the “power of the seed and rain”

## 2. I have to trust in the “power of the seed”

The epistle reading of today (Heb 4v 12,13) states that the Word of God is powerful and alive, and penetrates deep into the heart.

Jesus himself lived this attitude. The parable starts with the statement that people came from all over to listen to Jesus. He did not ignore them and focus on his disciples. He did not speak softly to reach only the most eager ones. He did not pass by the Pharisees because of their attitude towards him, but accepted their invitation to dine with them, and there share the good news. He did not scold John for his doubt, but encouraged him. Like the sower, he generously spread the good news of the kingdom of God!

For us as pastors this means: We should invest our energy into confirmation class and not assume that most will turn away anyway!

We should put all our love and energy into baptism preparation, especially for those who only appear when a child needs to be baptised, and not assume that it will be in vain.

As congregation we should not give up on those who are at the fringe, who never participate, but creatively think of new ways of reaching out.

Of course we should also focus on the core group, the good soil - but not only on them!

We may trust that the Word of God is indeed alive and active. We cannot see beyond the surface - but we can sow and plough, trust that the rain will come, and that the seed will grow.

And then the parable indicates that the result will be amazing

## 3. I will be amazed by the crop

Again we need to look at the passages before and after this parable. There Luke tells the story of the woman who washes and anoints the feet of Jesus. She was a rejected person, a “foot path” type - prostitute, known for her life style and irreligious behaviour. And yet, the word of God, the gospel of life and forgiveness had reached her, and transformed her!

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Dear congregation, it is not our task to decide who will believe and who not. It is our calling to sow the seed, to spread the word, and to then be amazed at how it bears fruit, how lives are changed, and all to often people that we had given up on, turn out to be fertile soil.

Today we are also invited to allow this Word to speak into our own lives again. I pray that I will expose also those areas that I have given up on in my own life, to this word- so that it can bear fruit within me, and my life can be a field to the glory of God!

Amen

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