

CONCENTRATE ON THE SOWING – REGARDLESS!

A sermon on Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 by John Fowler 16 July 2017

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The parable of the Sower, the Seeds and the Soil - as told by Jesus in this evening's Gospel reading - aims to cover every possibility. Standard interpretations of this parable have largely concentrated and focused on the types of soil the seed was planted in – or scattered upon – and urged us to identify what type of soil we are – good, bad, rocky, thorny and the usual exhortation to change and/or improve our lives so that we can be more receptive to God's word!

We were challenged to be concerned about what kind of ground we were on with God. How many birds were in our field, how many rocks, how many weeds, how many thorns? We were challenged to work out how we could clean them all up, how we could turn ourselves into well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized (organic?) fields for the sowing of God's word. The odds were three to one against us — those are the odds in the parable, after all — and we were challenged to work out how we could beat the odds, or at least improve on them, by cleaning up our ground – our lives.

But what if the parable is as much – or maybe more – about the sowing or the planting, rather than the type of ground?

For us – as 21st century Christians - I think that the sowing and the planting is going to become – or maybe remain – the main focus of the sharing of the Good News of Salvation through Jesus Christ.

Preliminary figures from last year's Census are scary!

They show that in the 2016 Census about 30% of the Australian population indicated that they have "NO RELIGION"! This percentage has almost doubled this century!

"NO RELIGION" BY 21ST CENTURY CENSUS YEARS:

2001 - 16%

2011 - 23%

2016 - 30%

Not only is there an increase in the percentage of the Australian population who claim to have "No Religion" there is also an (alarming) decrease in the percentage of Australians identifying as Christians – but then only one in seven of these attend church at least once a month. In the 2016 Census 52% of Australians identified as Christians. This was down compared to:

"CHRISTIAN" BY CENSUS YEARS:

1996 - 88%

1991 - 74%

2016 - 52%

This means that the Census figures in 2021 will probably show that less than 50% of Australians identify as Christian.

So, if our church is to survive – if Christianity is to survive - in our community, in our city and in our country – how and where and when is the Good News about Jesus to be planted? The short answer is everywhere – and by every possible available method. The sowing needs to be reckless, extravagant and boundary-less!

Just 2 weeks ago I read this in the Herald-Sun e-news: “Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon will be moving to stop Federal Parliament opening every day with the Lord's Prayer.

The push follows figures from last year's census showing less than one third of Australians identify with no religion.

Senator Rhiannon, who raised the issue in the NSW parliament in 2003, wants a period of reflection instead for MPs to reflect on their responsibilities and will be pursuing the change when parliament resumes from the winter break.

The parable is about the extravagance of a Sower who does not seem to be fazed by the birds stealing and feeding on the seed, the rocks and the thorns or other concerns such as politicians, but a generous and confident Sower who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks their way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around

This interpretation, as “The Parable of the Sower” rather than “The Parable of the Different Kinds of Ground”, may sound quite different from the traditional interpretation. The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our Maker - the Prolific Sower - who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into the seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of God’s love and truth.

And do we – have we – done any “sowing” at South Yarra Community Baptist Church?

- Yes, we have signs and symbols acknowledging and welcoming our First Peoples of this land.**
- Today some planting was done to establish an indigenous garden**
- We have signs and rainbow stickers indicating that this is a safe place for sexual minorities**
- We support the Indigenous Hospitality House and the Refugee Resource Centre (remember Meryl is bringing her basket again next week for donations).**
- Our church has a Website which is detailed and especially welcoming for minority and non-conforming groups and individuals**
- Our church has a unique Liturgy followed by a Communal meal – to which all are invited – great hospitality!**
- Our church has fantastic Liturgical Resources on line - “Laughing Bird Resources” – which were acknowledged 2 weeks ago in the speech of the retiring General Secretary of the Baptist World**

Alliance (The Baptist's Pope) at the Baptist World Alliance Study Commissions in Bangkok. These resources are available to and used by people world-wide.

- And about 1 year ago we farewelled Alison and her family to establish "Sanctuary" in Warrnambool. Although I've never been there it is apparently larger than here attendance-wise – and it has many more children.**

So have we finished our Sowing? I hope not. What about some of the ideas put forward at the "Open Space" day? What about all the people who live over there (N)? And over there (S)? And over there (E)? And over there (W)? We are called South Yarra Community Church, but more than half of us live outside South Yarra! What are we doing about the people of South Yarra?

God calls us to live the Gospel – not just to think about it, not just to dream about it, not just to pray about it – but to implement it. Jesus calls people to action. Let's follow Jesus' example. Let's continue to spread the seeds generously, extravagantly, continually and indiscriminately – there is no point in being exclusive or selective. Jesus welcomed all. We must continue to do so too as members of the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:5) remembering how we, as a community of faith, are all leaders who are all called to use our God given gifts to love, serve and grow in collective community.

Jesus' approach to mission was quite at odds with our often 'play-it-safe' instincts. Too often we 'play-it-safe' by sowing the Word only where we are confident it will be well received. In the name of good stewardship we

hold tightly to our resources, making sure that nothing is wasted. We often stifle creativity and energy for mission by resisting new or different ideas in the fear that they may not work.

Jesus gives us freedom to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. He endorses and encourages extravagant generosity in sowing the Word, even in perceived perilous/rocky/thorny places. Though we may wonder at the wisdom or efficiency of his methods, Jesus promises that the end result will be a bumper crop.

If you are more fortunate than others, build a longer table, not a taller fence. And sow more seeds.

Amen.