

The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time – YrA – 16 July 2023

Message Choose to Bear fruit!

Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, your kingdom come, your will be done, that all may hear the Word of God. **Amen.**

A simple view of the parable of the sower sees the lives of different people, and their responses to the word of God, as the different soil types described. The early church probably recognised people who had shown all of these responses. The parable is affirmation of the reality of the different responses of those around us and is an encouragement to bear fruit in our lives, fruit that will last.

As Christians, it is tempting to take the parable no further; to sit here smugly thinking well we're alright, though we might need to bear a bit more fruit. But there is another way of engaging with the parable. We can recognise that in each one of us are all four responses to different parts of the way of Christ. We find it easy to give some parts of our lives over to God and much harder to give over other parts. Unfortunately, God calls for every part of our lives.

What are the parts of our lives where we don't even want to hear the word of God? What are the parts of our lives where we started off with great enthusiasm and have not stuck with the word of God? What are the parts of our lives where the concerns of the world, everyday pressures, have strangle our response to the word of God? We all have all of those parts to our lives.

None of us are consistently saintly, and when we hear the lives of saints most of them were not consistently saintly either. It seems that no one has every part of their life in order and conforming to the Word of God.

It would be possible at this point to start venturing into some of the areas where we might individually be doing better. However, this is better done as a personal spiritual exercise, possibly a part of our daily pattern, reflecting on what went well, what could have gone better, the blessings we receive, and the how we can use our gifts to bless others. The common name for this is an examen, usually done at the end of the day but can be done at other times too.

We could also consider the challenges we face as a faith community. The vestry are in the process of articulating a vision for the cathedral. It will help us to identify some of the areas we should be addressing. There are many opportunities and we need some kind of prioritisation. We cannot fix it all but we can do a few things well. Those things depend both on the opportunities and the gifts that we have. We need wisdom in finding those places where God is already at work and calling us to use our gifts.

So, instead of applying the parable of the sower to our lives, I wondered how it applied to the lives of Rebekah, Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Here we have another kind of gift, another 'interesting' reading. Not perhaps as challenging as Abraham agreeing to sacrifice Isaac, but certainly a story with its own degree of strangeness. The behaviour of the characters involved cannot be considered a paradigm for following the way of God. Yet, these are the ancestors of God's chosen people. We are left in no doubt that God loves people even

when they are less than perfect! God made a commitment to Abraham and upholds that promise even when the recipients of the promise seem less than worthy.

This brings us into the debated territory of election: to considering to what extent God determines world events and chooses particular individuals. Despite the twists and turns, the recurrent theme of the stories of the patriarchs is that they are chosen and that God is faithful to that choice.

One of the twists is that Esau, the first born son, is not the descendant of Isaac God choses to work through. Even before Esau and Jacob are born it is prophesied that Jacob will be the favoured one. There is a strong sense of election or predestination here. This is a theme that recurs throughout the bible including in the New Testament.

God chose or appointed Christ before time; God chose a new people to be God's people; God chose leaders for the church; God elects people to salvation; all of this can be found in the New Testament. It leaves us wondering what element of choice we have. Is our response to the Word of God, the soil of our lives, ours or is it chosen for us.

The fact that the patriarchs and matriarchs were chosen seems to be somewhat detached from, almost despite, their response to God's election and calling. If Isaac and Rebekah understood that God would create nations through them we might have expected a Godlier approach to their children. Instead, their sons appear to be a cause of division between them. Yet, in God's vision both can be blessed. Though they also represent an ongoing enmity between the nations of Edom and Israel and this is the origin story of that enmity.

The tension between God's election or choice and our freewill is summed in a single sentence in Peter's second letter, "*Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election.*" (2 Peter 1.10) God calls and elects us to be a part of the body of Christ. We have the free will to choose whether to respond to our calling and election. The New Testament is entirely at ease with these apparently contradictory propositions being simultaneously true.

If we look to the writings of the early church the nature of election seems to have been understood in diverse ways and sometimes with a sense that there are those who are not called, who are positively excluded. However, when the tensions are explored more fully in Justin Martyr's writing, "*Free-will in Men [and Women] and Angels*". He writes "*But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men [and women] shall certainly be punished, it did so because it fore knew that they would be unchangeably [wicked], but not because God created them so. So if they repent, all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God.*" This makes explicit what is often only implicit in the New Testament, that no one is excluded from the elect, all are called. We hold this as a matter of faith.

Justine Martyr, like most of us, believes we have freewill. Perhaps surprisingly our understanding of the physical world offers no mechanism for anything that looks like freewill. In physics and all the known forms of mathematics, we have just two options, the deterministic and the random.

If the events that led to our current situation entirely determine our choices, then they are no choices at all. We are machines, albeit ones so complex none of us can predict entirely what another person will do. On the other hand, if

our choices are a matter of random neurons firing, we also have no choice at all. One might have some hope in emergent properties but nothing that we understand so far moves us away from options that look nothing like free will.

Where we once spoke theologically of a God of the gaps, God working in the gaps of our scientific understanding, today, it seems we must also have a freewill of the gaps. Recognising that we understand fully neither God nor the universe, we need not be too disconcerted. Just honest that we believe we have the choice of how we respond to the Word of God. Few people seriously believe they are without freewill. We may at times feel powerless but that sense of powerlessness comes, in part, from our normal sense of agency and freedom.

The more I read the Bible, the more I wonder if it is at ease holding apparently contradictory propositions because its authors had the wisdom to see the limits of our knowledge of the universe and of God.

We are the elect of God, so too is everyone else. We must also elect to follow God; God's election is not forced upon us. When the New Testament talks of God's election it talks of the God of love, mercy, grace, wisdom, and knowledge. This is the nature of our election. Our God is without limit, beyond our conception, yet revealed to us in Christ, who invites us all to bear fruit in every part of our lives. We are called to continuously examine the soil of our life and in every part respond fully to the Word of God.

May we hear and respond to God's call and bear fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen and respond with all their will! Amen. Amen. Amen.