

# *the sower's sacrament*

a sermon preached on the  
*5<sup>th</sup> sunday after pentecost*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The Lectons: Genesis 25:19-34, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

I would say that from the moment of my first hearing of today's gospel parable it reinforced what I already believed about life. Namely, that there are different kinds of people in the world – only a few of whom get life's rewards, the majority of whom who do not. And those who do get life's rewards get the rewards in fantastic abundance.<sup>1</sup>

For the statistics in Jesus' parable are very close to that piece of common sense known as the 20:80 rule. That is, twenty per cent of the population get eighty per cent of life's rewards – because they deserve it. The other eighty per cent don't deserve it – in one way or another, it's their own fault.

This is the world's 'wisdom' – it's the all-pervasive 'operating system' without which no 'application' software works. It's the water we have been drinking, the air we have been breathing, for centuries. And it can be found in the wisdom literature of a great many traditions – including Jewish and Christian literature.

So according to this common sense operating system religious teaching simply becomes a religious variant of the operating system itself. In fact, because of the opacity of conventional wisdom, 'common sense', it's virtually impossible to hear anything else. The operating system determines the interpretation of the biblical text. Thus, the aim of the Christian life is to be one of the 25 per cent who constitute 'good soil'.

So when I hear the parable I am already looking around and judging those around me. Is this person like the path, someone without understanding?<sup>2</sup> Is that person like the rocky ground, preoccupied with difficulties?<sup>3</sup> Or what about this person, are they like the thorns, concerned with their money or possessions? Under the pervasive influence of the dominant operating system life is bound to be competitive. I am competing with you and everyone else for limited places as God's favoured. It's just another variant of the law of supply and demand – which everyone knows is common sense wisdom.

Well, do you think this is true? Do you think this is what Jesus had in mind – dividing up people according to the categories of conventional thinking? Perhaps Jesus' curious repeated remark sounds the warning: "Let anyone with ears listen!"<sup>4</sup>

I have come to the firm conclusion that this way of hearing Jesus' parable cannot possibly be correct. The principal reason is precisely because I do not hear anything in the teaching of Jesus which supports conventional, 'common sense', teaching. Quite the opposite in fact: Jesus' teaching nearly always turns common sense upside down. We can go just about anywhere in the gospels for the evidence. But without searching very far, just a few verses prior to today's parable, we hear Jesus turn upside down conventional wisdom about what constitutes 'family'. And one of the sure signs that the Christianity is still captive to conventional wisdom is the current fixation on 'the family' – which is so at odds with its founder's paradigm-shifting teaching.<sup>5</sup>

The second reason is that it so obviously fosters judgement of others and an inflated sense of self. Or, alternatively, it may work the other way around and foster an unreasonable judgment against self – though this, too, is inflation, only negatively instead of positively. I see nothing in the revelation in Christ to support either negative or positive inflation – or the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:8

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:19

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:21

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 13:43

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 12:46-50

judging of myself against others, or vice versa; or the carving up of the world's peoples into the kind of permanent-sounding categories which the dominant operating system tends to create.

Today's gospel serves to highlight the ever-present danger in religion. The god is always at risk of being conscripted in the service of conventional wisdom. What appears as though it is Christianity may in fact be nothing more than a disguised form of prosperity doctrine – the conventional wisdom of the world which Jesus the Christ emphatically rejects.

What have we already heard from the one who says “Let anyone with ears listen”? “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.”<sup>6</sup> “Do not be anxious about your life.”<sup>7</sup> “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”<sup>8</sup> “Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”<sup>9</sup> It should be clear that conventional ‘wisdom’ is not in fact wisdom at all when assessed according to the teachings of Christ.

When I am really able to hear the great Sower – then I become aware that path, rocky ground, thorns, and good soil are all identifiable realities within *me*, they are *all* aspects of me. Living in a superficial manner, getting caught up in life's dramas, being preoccupied with all the things that really don't matter, hearing, understanding, and bearing good fruit – this is not someone else, all of this is me! And of course, this is true of every person. The parable is an accurate description of the nature of our humanity.

Thus heard, the parable fosters a more integrated sense of self – liberated from unreasonable judgment both of others and self. Thus heard, I am a little less prone to religious inflation – either negative or positive. Thus heard, I am perhaps able to hear the Sower's reckless and profligate gift – this seed is scattered everywhere! Perhaps I may begin to hear the Sower's great reversal of conventional wisdom. And perhaps I may hear in the Sower's liberating sacrament the communion by which the whole of my totality is received, transfigured, transformed, broken open for the life of the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:19,21  
<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:25  
<sup>8</sup> Matthew 11:39  
<sup>9</sup> Matthew 7:3