

God is like a foolish farmer – Psalm 65:9-14, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I confess that I find this parable, the first of seven parables in Matthew 13 that Jesus tells to describe how the kingdom of heaven (what Mark and Luke refer to as the kingdom of God) is at work in our world, a little confusing.

On the face of it, it's very straightforward. A sower sows seeds and depending on where they land there are different yields. My experience of farming is limited – apart from watching three series now of *Clarkson's Farm* – but that is how it seems to work.

What I'm not exactly sure of, however, in this parable is what represents what!

A parable in biblical terms is a story, filled with metaphors, that reveals spiritual truth. It comes from a Greek word meaning 'to throw alongside', and so Jesus 'throws' this story 'alongside' his teaching about God's kingdom to reveal to us something about it.

I get that the parable is saying 75% of the ground that is seeded may not deliver a good crop. It's too hard or too rocky or too thorn infested. In other words, according to the explanation in verses 18-23, if the word of the kingdom is the seed, roughly three out of every four people will not receive it or respond to it.

Which fits with what is happening here in Matthew 13. Jesus is experiencing growing opposition to his message (Matthew 5) that it is the poor, the grieving, the meek who are blessed – loved - by God, and the merciful, the righteous, the peacemakers who belong to God's kingdom. In the chapters before this reading, Jesus is rejected by the unrepentant cities, the scribes and the Pharisees (those "*children in the marketplaces*" we heard about last week) and at the end of chapter 13, Jesus is rejected in his hometown.

This parable then is Jesus' explanation of that opposition to his ministry.

So, if Jesus is the Sower, sowing the seed, then what represents the disciples in the parable? And how are we, if we count ourselves among Jesus' disciples, to respond?

Are we the seed? No, it seems the seed is the message, the word of the kingdom. Though, as the word of the kingdom is revealed in our lives, you could argue that we are the seed. Or are we the soil, the different kinds of soil that receive the seed in different ways? You could also argue that. Or are we, as disciples of Jesus, to see ourselves, also as sowers, apprentice sowers, farm hands, jackaroos and/or jillaroos of Jesus?

That is where I land. My reading of the parable is that, as Jesus' disciples, we are to follow in the steps of the Sower.

Because, firstly, this parable provides an explanation and an encouragement to disciples who experience the same lack of response or rejection that Jesus did proclaiming the word and the values of the kingdom.

I am reminded of that group of Aboriginal Christian leaders Safina mentioned, William Cooper and also Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls (from my *Sunday to Sunday* a week ago); how their work for justice and their calls for compassion were the direct outworking of their faith. In a sermon aired on the ABC, Nicholls tells the congregation, *"Why bother about the Aborigines? I want to suggest three things about why you should bother about the Aborigines. Firstly, we belong to a great family of God and he [has made] of one blood all nations of men. Secondly,...we're part of the Great British Commonwealth of Nations. And thirdly, we want to walk with you. We don't wish to walk alone."*

And though the task of sowing the kingdom word is hard and sometimes heartbreaking, we are assured here that the harvest will come – extraordinarily so! Verse 23; *"in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty"*. These numbers are 3 to 10 times what a good agricultural yield would have been in the ancient Near East. In other words, the harvest is God's work and God will do it! As our Psalm says, *"You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness."*

Secondly, and I am pushing the limits of the parable here, but, as sowers, I think our task goes beyond just sowing the seed.

As I mentioned, all my recent agricultural knowledge comes from episodes of *Clarkson's Farm* which occasionally get serious, when they talk about the 'overworking' of the soil – the concern Britain may have only 100 harvests left – unless more is done to rejuvenate the soil. And so, on the show we have seen direct drilling to protect the soil structure, companion crops to improve the nitrogen levels and goats brought in to eat the brambles.

And the same principles of land care could be applied to sowers of the word. The soil where good news is snatched away quickly, the lives where the seed of the word is snatched away quickly, might be more receptive when the gospel is lived out faithfully and humbly in that place. I am thinking of those in our congregation who have stories of terrible damage churches have done in the past. The soil where *"trouble or persecution"* affects the growth need the church to stand beside them, offering the support and care they need. And the soil where the *"cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word"* need the courageous example of other Christians prepared to sacrifice, to give up things, to put kingdom values above their own needs and desires.

Are we as sowers of the seed also engaged in careful land management – to a faithful witness of love and care and self-giving?

Coming back to *Clarkson's Farm*, while there is serious talk about agrarian issues, what makes the show genuinely engaging is the foolishness of the farmer himself; Jeremy Clarkson buying a tractor (because it is a Lamborghini) that has the wrong hitch, that's too big to fit in the shed or go through gates, ignoring the need for tramlines so the field can't be irrigated properly, watching him chase his sheep as they escape over stone walls.

And in the same way, what stands out about the Sower in this parable is not how careful they are with everything but how careless they are!

Anglican priest and academic Barabara Brown Taylor writes, we get caught up on *"successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns"* but this parable is all about the *"extravagance of a Sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighbourhood to the rafters."*

Are we prepared, as apprentice sowers, as Jesus' farm hands, to be just as foolish? Just as extravagant with the word of the kingdom showered so extravagantly on us? Just as indiscriminating with the word of God's love poured abundantly into our lives? Just as persistent and insistent that all should see and know and hear the good news that God is remaking our world – feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, welcoming the strangers, meeting the needs of those in need, providing justice where justice is long due?

Are we prepared to be foolish farmers alongside our God? As the parable says, *"Let anyone who has ears listen."*