

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15 Year A 2017

One of the great sadnesses many in the church feel is of abandonment, of loss, that so many of their loved ones – children, grandchildren, friends, no longer practice the faith. I hear from many people the bewilderment and disappointment that the faith they so love and continue to uphold has been rejected by so many. With our sadness, there is often also a sense of failure. *They went to church school, they attended Sunday school, they used to serve, they used to sing in the choir, they used to be so active, they used to be so committed.... What went wrong? Have we - have I - failed?* There are few things that terrify us more than the prospect that we may have failed. With so many empty pews, (but in all honesty, with so many pews in this church what hope did we ever have in filling this vast sea of seating??...); with people preferring their sleep in, Sunday papers and coffee down the street, we *can* easily despair and ask ourselves, *'have we failed?'*

The tension and anxiety we feel is all the more exacerbated by us living in a world where so much is geared towards success. Value is piled upon success. It is success which drives people, success which attracts people, success which in and of itself is seen as a virtue. And, large swathes of the church have also bought into this idea of success. But success is a tricky thing. It is fleeting; the goal posts keep changing. What one generation or group of people determines as having 'made it', another will see as weak and insubstantial.

For Christians of course, we need another language. The language of success ought to be strange to us. It is *not* part of our currency. What usually passes as success in the world around us sits uncomfortably beside what we might view as success. Bigger is seen as best, whether it's bigger bank accounts or bigger churches or bigger congregations. In the face of those enormous forces it can be hard to resist, or to articulate an alternative vision. I was somewhat reassured to read recently a little saying, *'there is simply no biblical teaching to indicate church size is a measure of success.'* For us, then, it is *not* so helpful to think in terms of success, so corrupted has the term become. Much better to understand ourselves in terms of fidelity - faithfulness. How have we been faithful to the teachings of Christ? How have we been faithful to our calling and vocation? How faithful have we been to the life of grace?

How faithful have we been to the teachings and traditions of the church? We ought not be so concerned with success as we are for growth in virtue, in love, faith and hope. Of course, we do fail as individuals and as a church. But we do not understand these in the light of success. We see them in the light of God's call to fidelity.

When it comes to facing failures in life, the sower in today's Gospel parable sounds a lot like many of us. We work hard, and only sometimes succeed. Most of the best things that we give to others *are not* received well by them. Most of what we want to plant in the lives of those around us doesn't "take"; it doesn't become rooted and permanently planted in their lives. We can feel we have failed... While so much in our lives and even in our church is directed towards so called success, it is good to be reminded of the failures in Jesus' own life and ministry. The Cross is the lasting witness to that. His own people

rejected him. One of his closest friends sold him for a pocketful of silver. His other friends showed a constant inability to comprehend at any significant level what Jesus was trying to say and do. By all worldly measures Jesus' life and work and failure.

Perhaps we are not so used to thinking of Jesus' life and ministry in those terms. But he knew full well the pain of failure. This is really highlighted for us in this part of Matthew's Gospel, as we are hearing it today and for the next few weeks. The sequence of parables we hear from today and the next few weeks comes after a section in the gospel where misunderstanding and opposition to Jesus' teaching and ministry have been encountered. The parable today, then, reflects that hostility, and the rejection Jesus experienced of his ministry. And it further reflects the experience of the early church. And so, at this point in the gospel we start to become aware of how the mission to Israel as a whole is failing. And that, really, is the crux of it all. God takes seeming failure to use to his good ends. God uses our limitations to make known his power and grace. So while talk of failure may seem so terribly dismal and discouraging, we need to remember that Jesus did not let apparent failure stop Him. In the parable we hear today, Jesus goes on to speak about a crop that yielded a super-abundant harvest. Today's Gospel parable is not a dirge - it is a celebration; it is a story of hope, not of despair.

It is so, so important to remember that any good that does come is in spite of ourselves. If we are honest with ourselves we will know how much failure there is in our life, how flawed and fragile we really are, how lame our efforts, how weak our faith, how small our trust, how tame our commitments, how feeble our generosity. But still... but still... good emerges!! Through these flawed and weak vessels, God works!! But this shouldn't surprise us. Any casual reading of the Scriptures we will see this dynamic at work: God always choosing what is weak in the world to make known his will and fulfil his plan. God chooses the failures, not the superhuman!! That should give us courage. But it is perhaps human nature that when faced with failure we withdraw. We hold back. We act more conservatively and cautiously. We become risk adverse. But in this we note the gesture of the farmer. He sows his seed wildly, freely, he scatters not caring where it falls! He knows some will be lost, he knows some will start well and then falter. And he knows some *will* take root and bear abundant fruit.

Failure and difficulty are not an excuse to stop trying!!! In this stage of the Church's life, we must see in our seeming failure as opportunity! Because all time is God's time! It is a time for grace. It is a time to refocus and reorient ourselves to the Gospel. So, the parable today offers us a firm challenge: to keep sowing the seed. And to be generous with it, confident that it will bear fruit!

However, we cannot hide behind the idea - as so often happens - that we are simply 'planting seeds', when in fact we are merely engaging self-indulgent projects, and shrug our shoulders and sort of not expect much to happen. *Fidelity to God's word will bear fruit.* Of that we must be confident. We are perhaps beginning to realise that so much of the seed we have been attempting to sow has been inferior quality, indeed wasting time and effort.

For decades now we invested our efforts in running tennis clubs and bingo nights, op shops and even schools, so often under the mask, *well at least we're planting seeds...* Really? Where then is the fruit? Nothing can substitute faithfulness to the pure truth of Jesus Christ! And that will be our greatest task. To re-examine ourselves and reclaim what was rejected, lost or compromised. And commit ourselves anew to the harvest of the Lord. Amen.