

Picture of Thomas Erikson's book Dealing with setbacks

In our gospel reading this morning we see Jesus responding to setbacks using a story, a parable.

Immediately before this Matthew records Jesus facing increasing grumbles from those listening to him. Some are downright scurrilous – suggesting that when he heals people it's because the devil is at work in him, or that he is mad. Even, just before this parable, we have his family turning up, perhaps hoping to lead him away quietly.

So, he faces opposition. There's also the fact that in spite of his charisma, healing miracles and great teaching, not everyone responds to his message. And those that do are not always the most respectable or popular members of society at that time. Nor, necessarily, the most religious. So, what might that be saying? We might imagine the disciples gathered round Jesus at the end of a long day chewing over the day's events and puzzling over why there is such opposition and why, in spite of the crowds, there aren't more people wanting to be Jesus' followers. Perhaps he needs to change his tactics? Adopt a different strategy?

Jesus was dealing with set backs – it wouldn't be long before his cousin John Baptist would be executed and opposition would ramp up. We could even say that Jesus is dealing with failure – not a word we might easily associate with him.

In today's gospel the parable of the sower is the first of a number of parables that subtly address setbacks or failure. After this parable there's the field of wheat with all the weeds growing up among the good crop and the farmer advising that they are left because pulling them up might also uproot the wheat; the net with all kinds of fish, not all of them edible. There's the tiny mustard seed, hidden, that nevertheless grows into a tree, or the small, hidden amount of yeast that still leavens the whole loaf of bread.

The parable of the sower carries the same note of quiet optimism; perhaps there are many who don't respond, and we can hypothesise about why that might be. Yet at the same time, there will be many who do respond because ultimately it's God's work. It doesn't all depend on us. As Isaiah says in our first reading (55.11), when it's God's word it bears fruit, it accomplishes God's purposes.

It's a good straightforward message of encouragement in the face of apparent setbacks or failure. And there's more; Jesus is affirming his approach to his mission, which is to announce the good news of God's Kingdom. Let's look at the farmer in this story, for Jesus, like him, is someone who is planting seeds, in his case the seeds of the kingdom, and anticipating a crop.

I'm intrigued by this farmer who doesn't seem to mind waste, or was there just a strong wind that day so that his crop ended up being sown all over the place?! But surely in that case he would have sown his crop on a different day! He'd have saved all that valuable seed from the previous year's crops and here he is scattering it everywhere! There's a profligacy or a generosity. A disregard for waste.

Isn't this similar to Jesus' approach to sharing the good news of the kingdom? He welcomes all comers in the crowds, not checking their credentials, positioning himself in that boat so that everyone can hear him, heals their sick etc. He feeds 5,000 people without checking whether they all really need food. In this he surely mirrors God's dealings with humanity – a generous invitation of grace and mercy to all. So that's part of what this parable might have been saying to weary followers of Jesus at the end of a long day. And it can say the same to us, Jesus' followers, today. Be generous in sharing the good news whether in words or actions. Don't be picky about who it's for or is most likely to respond. Don't be put off by apparent failure. There's more than enough to go round.

God's generosity is also mirrored in the generosity of nature, so often producing far more than expected. The farmer didn't have to worry about waste – there would be enough of a crop from the seed that had landed in good soil.

It's at this point that our picture of this generous piece of ground might change. Listening to this parable in a global context, instead of seeing a freshly ploughed field in the UK, I found myself picturing scorched fields in different parts of the world where there has been such prolonged drought because of climate change that crops have totally failed. You can sow as generously as you like but though your seeds might 'spring up quickly... when the sun rises they are scorched and wither away' (v6). Here, sowing crops is producing no result other than hardship. How might this parable sound to farmers in Kenya, Zimbabwe or the Horn of Africa?

Let's face it; it will sound very different to Christians there to how it sounds to us. How easy is it to trust God's generosity in those situations? The impact of climate breakdown is a set back of a totally different order from those addressed in Thomas Erikson's book.

Can this morning's parable offer hope in the face of a setback of such magnitude? I believe it can. Just as those first disciples were encouraged by Jesus' mission methods to be generous with whom they shared the good news so we too are invited to be generous with God's word, and in particular with how we might enable it to bear fruit in those countries most impacted by the climate crisis. This will require great courage and tenacity on our part, because for the good news of fruitful soil to become a reality in those drought ridden parts of the world we ourselves will need to be willing to be like the seeds being dropped into the earth, facing a kind of death in order to produce fruit. We in the richer parts of the world are facing the need to change our carbon-emitting, growth focussed, planet-warming way of life. It will mean a kind of death for us.

There's some good news from the wider church on this – church commissioners divesting from fossil fuels and a resolution from our diocese of Oxford passed at general synod. *Picture of Bp Olivia and others at synod.*

A motion brought by the Diocese of Oxford calls on all parts of the Church to review policies and procedures in order to give due priority to creation care, and asks the Government to review planning regulations to aid the installation of renewable technology on church buildings that are listed or in conservation areas.

It also commends the National Investment Bodies for their decisions to divest from fossil fuels, calls for regular prayer, and encourages the opportunity for confirmation candidates to make commitments to safeguard the integrity of creation.

Introducing the motion the Bishop of Reading, Olivia Graham, said: "There is no greater issue facing society today than runaway climate change. Our Church, with the level of resources, reach and influence we have, must be on the frontline of the battle to save God's creation."

So, it's painful for us, but aren't we as Christians already committed to following a path that is about losing our life in order to gain it, trusting that abundant life awaits all who choose Jesus' way? We've chosen a different path, we dance to a different drum. We want to be a part of that shift when the soil once again becomes fruitful and with our brothers and sisters overseas we can with integrity celebrate as Isaiah says:

You shall go out in joy
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills shall burst into song,
and all of the trees shall clap their hands. (55.12)

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