

Sermon - A personal soil analysis

Rev Norman Wilkins for St Ronan's 16 July 2017

From the readings Ps 119:105-112, Mt 13:1-9, 18-23

The parable of the sower is in all three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke so I will have preached on it many times, and you will have heard sermons on it probably even more times.

It is generally assumed that the early church put in the second part of the reading to make the words of Jesus apply to how they were getting on in sowing the message of Jesus, in other words how they were getting on in their evangelistic enterprise. I expect that it was pretty realistic that people received the message in more or less those four ways.

However, that situation doesn't apply today, for the days of preaching the Gospel in that old, original way, the evangelist on the street corner, or the pair who come to our doors has long passed as a successful technique. Any attempt to do it now is the stuff of jokes and ridicule applied to some out of touch people on the fringe of real society. I guess that using social media would be the best chance of success today.

However, I will start by saying that there has been a very productive harvest and to talk of thirty, sixty and one hundred fold return is an understatement. Essentially the core message of Christianity, loving our neighbours in all manner of largely practical ways has been absorbed by society in general. Things are far from perfect, but people of conscience and compassion outside the church are every bit as committed to what is truly loving as we who are in the Church.

I am going to treat this parable of the sower as an introduction to how we cope with the challenge to change. For that is the essence of what the parable is addressing. Jesus was trying to convince people to make their lives more loving and true to the essence of their Hebrew faith. The parable is a reflection on the various responses to what he was saying.

The illustration on the front of the order of service refers to the parable as the parable of the four types of soil, rocky soil, soil with birds, soil with weeds and

good soil, and actually that is a more appropriate title for it than the parable of the sower, for it isn't about the sower, but the response to his message.

What I am going to say is not about the message, but my response to it, in other words the soil the message was falling on. The message was the challenge to be fully accepting of gays. I was interviewed by a man doing his Ph.D. He was interviewing thirty ministers who are willing to conduct gay weddings and asking why and about their experiences. I was one of the thirty and regardless of the issue, the conditions that affected how I received the message seemed to me to be an up-to-date example of this parable.

So, I told the interviewer that it all started in the mid-1980s. I was in my first parish which was mainly rural and socially conservative. Things were chugging along OK, however with a few moments. I was a fairly impetuous **young minister who was starting to find out** who I was and what I thought. Then came the decriminalising of homosexuality. Of course, I knew what it was, I hadn't been to boarding school and heard an enormous collection of dirty jokes without knowing about such things.

However, homosexuality wasn't even on the horizon of my thoughts. The message of acceptance of homosexuals had never been a seed that had fallen upon the soil that was me. I just didn't have an opinion.

Then the Church all around me got quite excited in its opposition to this law reform. I was given petition forms to get signatures on to be presented to parliament opposing the law reform. I circulated the forms and put my signature on one. I did wonder a little bit about whether it was the right thing to do, largely because I felt somewhat uncomfortable about the attitudes of some of the people who enthusiastically signed it.

A key moment was when I presented the petition to a woman on the periphery of the parish and she simply said, "I'm not signing that thing",

I am not a particularly wise person. I would make a real mess of anything that depends on me making good judgements if other people who know better than me didn't guide me.

I have always had people in my parishes who are these guides. I don't think they have any idea I look on them like that, but they are my hidden guides. In terms of this parable they are good gardeners who know the difference between weeds and good plants and their wisdom given unwittingly pulls out the weeds of bad ideas and nurtures the good seed of what are good ways to go.

This woman was one of these wise gardeners and that comment of hers meant that I was challenged to start to think about the issue of gays. I had work to do obviously.

So, the first influence on me when I started to wonder how to respond to the message of gay acceptance was the attitude of people around me.

I wonder how much your attitude towards new messages that mean change are affected by those around you.

Towards the end of the interview I said that other people had an enormous effect on my initial decision whether to support or oppose something.

I had found that regardless of the issue, my viewpoint was always supported by the same sort of people and opposed by the same sort of people. I almost didn't need to think it through for myself, just look at who supported it and opposed it. However, the word "almost" is necessary. I do come to my own position.

Anyway, the next soil conditioner that made it a whole lot more suitable for gay acceptance was by chance meeting gay people. The Interim Moderator of my next parish had just come out as gay, and I soon came to really like and respect that man. I had my first experience of seeing what sort of harvest would come from sowing gay acceptance.

Then a young friend of ours came out as gay and got treated by his conservative church in the unhelpful way that these churches usually do; trying to change him through what they dared to call prayer, and he came to talk to us for support. He was the most admirable and fine young man. That was another example of seeing that gayness produced a good harvest and

that the church could all too easily be like the birds that come and eat up the harvest or weeds that strangle it by trying to make it what it is not.

This sounds as if I had got the issue sorted. I was on the way, but that's all. Because my nature is I believe to be pretty accepting of all individuals doesn't mean that the basic issue of accepting gays as equal was sorted.

I got to know more gay people and of course was supportive and friendly towards them, but it took the challenge of introducing Civil Unions to move me on in my attitudes. I thought about it and became a Civil Union Celebrant. This was in part in support for my gay friends and as a sign of my rejection of outfits like the Destiny Church.

My initial feelings of feeling the views of some people were right and some wrong that started in my first parish had become really strong by the time I was prepared to stand with my gay friends and express my contempt for what the Destiny Church stood for, and not to fudge the point, my contempt for the leaders of that church themselves.

However, had you asked me back then if I would support Gay Marriage, I would have hummed and arrhed. I wasn't really ready for that. Marriage was still for a man and a woman.

When new plants poke their heads up they are fragile and they take time to become hardy enough to cope with the challenges of a typical climate, and my support for gay equality had to grow.

It was fed and watered by contact with gay people and those who were further down the acceptance path than me. It was toughened up by being put on the spot a bit when I supported our minister speaking in support of gay marriage to a Parliamentary Select Committee.

Though it isn't a soil condition exactly, but for some plants there comes a time when they need taking out of the greenhouse of protection and made to stand up for themselves without any supporting stakes or sprays to kill off the insects that suck the sap from them.

That's the hard knocks of life and when the storms or frosts come, then the best harvest comes from the tough crops.

That brings me almost to where I am on my journey so far. There was one challenge and one reality check to go from the interview.

The challenge was the challenge so often posed by Jesus, I believe a core challenge of Christianity. It was challenge to love and accept despite our culture and our inherent feelings, what I called my hormones in the interview.

I said that in Jesus' time people had a natural suspicion or dislike of those suffering from leprosy, women, especially the unmarried ones who could disrupt family unity, tax collectors, Samaritans and pretty well anyone who wasn't like you. Jesus was actually saying that people were people, all deserved our equal love and consideration.

For me that challenged my natural heterosexual hormone driven dislike of homosexuality.

The challenge is actually simply illustrated when I marry a couple of men. I am convinced that it is the right thing to do as a Christian. It is consistent with Jesus' injunction to love our neighbour. However, at the moment I declare them to be joined together in marriage and they give each other a good kiss so everyone can take photos, I can't help my hormones screaming "No!"

That conflict should not be denied, but as a Christian I believe the right thing for me to do is rejoice with the couple and set aside the hormones just as much as I have often had to set them aside when a bride or bridesmaid is very attractive and stands before me in a low-cut dress.

Those cultural or hormonal influences can well be the weeds that can strangle the good harvest of practical Christian love.

The reality check that I will finish with took me a little by surprise. I was asked how certain I was that my attitude towards gays and marriage was the right one. I said maybe 90% sure.

There was always the possibility that as our understanding increased it would turn out that our liberal attitudes towards gays and in other ways might turn out to be harmful and that we were wrong to reject the rather rigid moral attitudes of the past.

I have never stopped being aware of passages like our Hebrew one from Ps 119 that said “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.” What are the righteous laws? I think my views have gone in the righteous direction, but I cannot be sure.

In terms of soil or gardening, I guess that is always the chance that it was the wrong crop after all and it needed rooting out and starting again.

I think that in all things, certainty is a very dangerous characteristic that can result in catastrophe.

I wonder if that account of my interview rang any bells for you.