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

I recently came across a couple of intriguing pages within some old files I found lying around in my office. Because these pages appear disconnected from their original context, it has required some careful reading and reflection to determine what they might mean.

The first page is quite guarded in its language, and its immediate meaning isn't clear. I found myself wondering if the author had been concerned about the reaction he or she might have evoked.

The second page appeared to be written on another occasion: a different ink was used. This second page was more illuminating than the first as it expanded on the contents of the first page, explaining some of the oblique language used there. It seems that the writer held grave concern for the social fabric of his or her local community. Initiatives to increase social cohesiveness had been met with widely varied responses:

- Some households were not in the least interested, and met any approaches with sneering, derision, or cynicism.
- Other households seemed keen at first, but then when they realised that social cohesion really necessitated their opening their lives and homes to others – including people from different backgrounds, different socio-economic classes, different races, or different religious views – their keenness quickly waned and participation halted. Some among them occasionally encountered trouble with those they met – some people are difficult to get along with, some present risks to person or property – and so felt that such trouble really called into question the whole thing.
- Quite a few households started well, and really seemed to get what it was all about, but then other things started crowding in: the pressures of contemporary working life, the need to give time to personal pursuits, concerns about the cost of offering hospitality of a standard thought suitable, and so on. Over time people

in this group would shake their heads with regret about how they'd once been able to be involved, but really couldn't manage it anymore.

- And finally there were some households which, despite all the challenges, persisted and found to their delight that the community of which they were part grew more connected, less prone to criminal activity and family harm, more resilient to difficult events striking individually or collectively, more fun, ... just better places to live really.

I went through several stages of reaction to these two pages. On one level they were simply historical and cultural artefacts belonging to some particular place and time. They were interesting in their own right in that sense ... but on reflection I realised that such merely historical interest would not hold me for long; it would not make much difference to me really.

Then it occurred to me that the pages could be of interest and relevance if I was starting my own work to develop social cohesion. The realistic evaluation of the different kinds of responses that households could make to such programmes could be both challenge and encouragement to me. There was challenge in that this paper would force me to think about how I might work to counter the different types of problematic responses, and thus increase my chances of success. The encouragement was the recognition that one should persist and work broadly even though the responses would be mixed. My work would fail sometimes for the various kinds of reasons listed; but it was worth doing for the wonderful results that could be obtained where the work succeeded.

I found myself wondering why the first page had been written at all. Why approach the topic in a cryptic fashion?

Eventually it dawned on me.

What if that first page had been written for an audience that included those who themselves really ought to have been engaged in activities to build social cohesion? For such a wide audience the evaluation of failure as well as success in this work would come across as a judgement and condemnation on those who really should have been persisting with this work despite the odds.

By this stage I was really quite enjoying my discovery, and the thought process it had prompted. Social cohesion seems such a valuable goal, it pleased me to think that someone was engaging in this area – and, it appeared, engaging in a pretty robust way.

But then ... Ouch!

I found myself thinking about my own life, my own household, and what our own response was to the need for greater social cohesion. I realised that it had been so easy to see it as someone else's problem, as something for the experts. I realised that the reasons given for people ignoring or dropping out of community engagement activities had their manifestations in my own life and in the life of my household. I really wasn't actively working towards this good of social cohesion at a personal level. Ouch!

Now what I have said so far is all a fiction: there are no such pages.

My fiction is designed to help us think about what is going on with the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-9 and its interpretation in verses 18-23, and, more importantly, how we might respond to it.

It is rather like we have two distinct pages written for two audiences. The first page is the parable itself, and Jesus addresses it to the crowd gathered in one of the natural amphitheatres formed by the lake's shoreline. The second page is the interpretation of the parable, and it is addressed to the disciples, in private.

Sometimes the parable is treated as though it is kind a reflection on the challenges of evangelism. And there is truth in this. We recognise that there are many impediments to people receiving the seed of the good news and allowing it to take root and flourish in their lives. There is the challenge therefore to broadcast widely and liberally; and also some kind of reassurance from knowing that we can't take responsibility for how the good news is received.

But it there is more than that going on here.

The potentially cryptic parable requires those listening in the crowd to supply their own interpretation. There are two possible reasons for this.

One is that Jesus really wants his listeners to engage, to think carefully about what he might stand for, and what it means for them. To spoon-feed them, to make it easy, increases the chance that it will be too readily dismissed as personally irrelevant. Those who are hungry, those whose hearts are open, will find God's truth revealed. Those who are too lazy, or too concerned with other things, or prejudiced against God's work among them, will remain in the dark.

The other possible reason is that there is risk in what Jesus is saying. And indeed there was. Effectively the parable of the Sower passes judgement on Israel and its leaders. The metaphor of God as the farmer and Israel as his field was well-known in their scriptures. A tale of the farmer acting to sow again to produce fruitfulness would have gained their attention and engaged with their deepest hopes. But this story doesn't go quite as expected: there is some wonderful success, certainly; but there is also failure.

The issue was that Israel was a nation that should have been planting the seed of God's word in people's lives and bearing much fruit. Instead, they had been seduced by the world's attitudes and concerns; either chasing after a restoration of their nationhood and place as God's chosen people through violence as the Zealots did, or chasing after their own comfort and status by conspiring with the Roman authorities and assimilating to their ways.

To say this sort of thing outright in public would have been dangerous talk. But Jesus has couched it in a parable so it fascinates and intrigues, rather than directly alienates. If one of his hearers works it out and tries to accuse him, he can simply say, "Well, that's what you say; what makes you think I meant that?"

That Jesus wants people to pay attention and to think it through for themselves is highlighted by the imperatives with which he begins and ends the parables: he begins "Listen!" or "Look!",¹ and he ends "Whoever has ears, let them hear!"

¹ This is missing in NIV, but is clearly in the Greek text: ἴδοú.

When Jesus is with his disciples, a safer environment where his audience are those with whom he has an ongoing deep journey and in whom his good news is already taking root, he can spell it out a little more fully. The “secrets of the kingdom of heaven” have already been given to them, as Jesus tells them in verse 11.

So far, so good.

But the Bible is never merely an historical artefact. It is God’s living word to us; and we should read it, not only for understanding, but with openness to change. We should read it carefully; over and over; widely and deeply; humbly; prayerfully; and in conversation with others.

We should read the Bible expecting God to use it to challenge and change us. The Bible holds a mirror up to the way we live; it invites the response of our lives.

And if we read Matthew 13 with openness and humility, then there could well be an “ouch” in this passage for us.

The “ouch” is that we who would claim that the good news has taken root within us are often far from fruitful for the kingdom, for the very same kinds of reasons that Jesus outlines.

The story of Esau despising his birthright, his inheritance, such that he would sell it to Jacob for a pot of stew prompts me to ask “What is our birthright as children of the Most High God; and do we value that birthright enough?”

Our birthright is participation in our heavenly Father’s work now and participation in the life of the age to come, and we despise our birthright when we allow it to be traded away for other things that make a call on our time, our resources, our commitment, our life. Paul too makes a sharp distinction between having minds set on what the flesh desires, versus on what the Holy Spirit desires for us (Romans 8:5-9). We live in one realm or the other; we cannot divide our allegiance.

Each of us individually, and we collectively, the Church today, need to heed Jesus’ challenge, just as Israel did when Jesus first spoke these words.

If nothing else, we should receive and act upon this challenge with humility and gratitude, because the word of God has been planted within us, not because we are worthy of it, but because of the gracious favour and liberality of the Sower.

We have come across these two pages in our old files. What are we to make of them?

Whoever has ears, let them hear!

Works consulted:

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