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ST AGNES' PASTORAL LETTER July 22, 2020

Dear friends

As we are now in pandemic lockdown 2.0, the church building is closed. We cannot accept donations for Saturday Recycle but we *can* accept donations for the St Mark's, Fitzroy, community centre (non-perishable foods and household goods only). These can be left at the back door of the church or, if you have a key, inside the narthex in the baskets set aside for that purpose. Valerie McDonald continues to cheerfully ferry these goods to Fitzroy on a regular basis.

The building may be closed, but the church itself is very much open. The work of the churchwardens, the parish council and the vicar continues. And the responsibility of every baptised member to reach out to friend and neighbour in the name of Christ continues. We are still Christians. We are still the church. We are still servants of Christ and imitators of his ways.

Whilst the church building is closed, the churchwardens and the honorary treasurer are progressing some long-standing maintenance issues. New visual equipment, for use during services, has been installed and the chapel walls repainted. Works on the ailing bell tower will begin the first week of August. The organ, which has been sounding a little unwell recently, will be repaired and we are looking into options for repairing or replacing our broken audio system. These works have only become possible because of your generous donations to our building fund.

We have moved our **10am Sunday service** online via Zoom. To join us via your computer or internet-connected phone or tablet, first download Zoom from your app store. Then make sure that you have the latest version of your favourite browser (Microsoft Edge, Apple Safari, Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox or whatever). Then check that you have a functioning microphone and camera. Finally, at a few minutes before 10 on any Sunday morning, simply click on this weblink: <https://zoom.us/j/94929058555>. If you are asked for a Meeting ID, type in 949 2905 8555. When asked to join the meeting via audio and/or video please do so by clicking on the little blue boxes. To join us via ordinary phone, call 03 7018 2005 and, when asked for the Meeting ID, key in 949 2905 8555 followed by # key. The service for Sundays can always be downloaded from <http://www.christologia.net/OoS.pdf> from the Friday morning immediately before the Sunday in question.

If you wish to join us for our **10am Wednesday bible study**, follow exactly the same procedure using the weblink <https://zoom.us/j/97393215631> and the Meeting ID: 973 9321 5631.

Jean Oliver is planning a new edition of *Reach Out* for distribution in August. Please, if you have a poem, an article, a cartoon or a photo you would like to contribute for the encouragement of your fellow parishioners, be in touch with Jean as soon as you can.

With a significant dollop of pride, I'm glad to report that Bruce Everett is nearing the end of that long process of discernment with the church about his sense of call to the distinctive diaconate. On August 14 he has an 'exit' interview with the Archbishop's examining chaplains, which is really the last requirement before the Archbishop makes his decision about whether Bruce should

proceed to ordination early next year. Please continue to pray for Bruce, and for all those closely involved, that they may hear and be at peace with God's way and will. Please continue to remember Nancy Jones in your prayers as well. Her knee surgery was successful but now she is facing the process of rehabilitation, initially at the Epworth in Wilson Street, Brighton.

As the wearing of face masks is now compulsory when you venture outside your home, some of you may be wondering where you can obtain washable masks that meet the guidelines. SisterWorks, a social enterprise run by refugee women, has masks for sale (sisterworks.org.au) as does clearcollective.com.au and etsy.com/au. Disposable masks can be bought at pharmacies, hardware stores, two-dollar shops and some supermarkets. Packs of 10 are better value.

I've including with this letter a couple of recent homilies along with the lectionary readings and some prayers for the next two weeks. Please remember that if you do not have a prayer book, you may borrow one from the church to assist with your daily devotions. I've also included an article from Bruce Everett about the realities associated with grief and loss in this pandemic.

The blessing of God be with you all,

Garry Deverell

Vicar

I work Sunday 7am-1pm, and Monday to Thursday 9am-3pm

Collect for 8th Sunday after Pentecost (July 26)

O God, the fount of wisdom, you have revealed to us in Christ the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price: grant us your Spirit's gift of discernment that, in the midst of the things of this world, we may learn to value the priceless worth of your kingdom, and be ready to renounce all else for the sake of the precious gift you offer. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Prayer of the week (July 26-Aug 1)

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: increase and multiply upon us your mercy, that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we finally lose not the things eternal. Grant this, O heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for 9th Sunday after Pentecost (August 2)

O God, giver of life and health, whose son Jesus Christ has called us to hunger and thirst for justice: refresh us with your grace, that we may not be weary in well-doing, for the sake of him who meets all our needs, Jesus Christ our saviour; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

Prayer of the week (Aug 2-8)

Almighty God, whose beloved son for our sake willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross: give us courage and patience to take up our cross daily and follow him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

HC

MP

EP

26 EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [17]

<i>Main Readings</i>	<i>Supplementary Readings</i>	
Genesis 29:15-28	§ Ps 45	Genesis 29:31 - 30:22
Ps 105:1-11 or Ps 128	§ Matthew 14:1-12	Ps 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39		Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 13:44-58		
1 Kings 5:5-12; Ps 119:129-136		

G

HC

MP

EP

2 NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [18]

<i>Main Readings</i>	<i>Supplementary Readings</i>	
Genesis 32:22-31	§ Ps 78:1-15	Genesis 31:43a, 44 - 32:2
Ps 17:1-7, 16	§ Matthew 15:1-9	Ps 145:14-21
Romans 9:1-8 (9-16)		Romans 10:17 - 11:6
Matthew 14:13-21		
Isaiah 55:1-5; Ps 145:8-9, 14-21		

G

3 Monday G

Jeremiah 28:1-17	Ps 78:36-38	Ps 78:39-70
Ps 119:81-88	Hosea 6:4-7, 7	Lamentations 1:1-11a
Matthew 14:22-36	John 10:40-11:16	Romans 7:1-12

or STEPHEN, DEACON AND MARTYR [If not observed, December 26]

<i>Proper collect</i>	<i>Invocation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Saints]</i>	R
2 Chronicles 24:17-22	Ps 130	Ps 78:39-70
Ps 31:1-8	Jeremiah 26:1-16	Lamentations 1:1-11a
Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-60	Acts 6:1-7; 7:1-49	Romans 7:1-12
Matthew 10:17-22		

4 Tuesday G John Baptist Vianney, priest of Ars, France (d. 1895) Collect of a Priest

Jeremiah 30:12-22	Ps 80	Ps 81
Ps 102:23-28	Hosea 7:8-16	Lamentations 1:11b-22
Matthew 15:1-2 (3-9) 10-14	John 11:17-37	Romans 7:13-25

W

5 Wednesday G Oswald, King and martyr (d. 642)

Jeremiah 31:1-7	Ps 82; 84	Ps 85; 87
Ps 72:15-21	Hosea 8	Lamentations 2:1-10
Matthew 15:21-28	John 11:38-54	Romans 8:1-8

R

6 Thursday THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD [If not celebrated, February 23]

<i>Proper collect</i>	<i>Invocation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Epiphany]</i>	W
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14	Ps 99	Ps 89:5-18
Ps 97	Habakkuk 3:3-19	1 Kings 19:1-16
2 Peter 1:16-19 (20-21)	2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2	John 12:20-33
Matt 9:2-10		

Of the day: G

Jeremiah 31:31-34	Ps 86	Ps 88
Ps 51:15-19	Hoses 9:1-12 (13-17)	Lamentations 2:11-22
Matthew 16:13-23	John 11:55 - 12:11	Romans 8:9-17

7 Friday G

Nahum 2:1-12 or 3:1-7	Ps 90	Ps 119:89-104
Ps 106:49-50	Hosea 10:1-12 (13-15)	Lamentations 3:1-33
Matthew 16:24-28	John 12:12-36a	Romans 8:18-27

8 Saturday G

<i>Dominic, priest and friar (d. 1221)</i>	<i>Collect of a Monastic</i>	W
Habakkuk 1:12 - 2:4	Ps 89:1-18	Ps 89:19-38
Ps 9:9-14	Hosea 11:1-11	Lamentations 3:34-66
Matthew 17:14-20	John 12:36b-50	Romans 8:28-39

AUGUST 2020

1 Saturday G

<i>Holy men and women of the Old Testament</i>	<i>Collect of a Saint</i>	W
Jeremiah 26:11-16 (17-23) 24	Ps 74	Ps 75; 76
Ps 69:32-38	Hosea 5:5 - 6:3	Ezekiel 47:1-12; 48:30-35
Matthew 14:1-12	John 10:19-39	Romans 6:12-23

31 Friday G

<i>Joseph of Arimathea</i>	<i>Collect of a Saint</i>	W
<i>Ignatius of Loyola, priest and founder of the Society of Jesus (d. 1556)</i> <i>Collect of a Monastic</i>	Ps (59) or Ps 148; 149	Ps (58; 79) or Ps 144; 150
Jeremiah 26:1-9	Ps 69:6-14	Ezekiel 40:1-5
Ps 69:6-14	Hosea 4:10 - 5:4	and 42:15 - 43:12
Matthew 13:54-58	John 9:39 - 10:18	Romans 6:1-11

30 Thursday G

<i>William Wilberforce, social reformer (d. 1893)</i>	<i>Collect of a Saint</i>	W
Jeremiah 18:1-6	Ps 72	Ps 73
Ps 146:1-7	Hosea 4:1-9	Ezekiel 38:14-23; 39:21-29
Matthew 13:47-53	John 9:18-38	Romans 5:12-21

29 Wednesday G

<i>Mary and Martha of Bethany</i>	<i>Collect of a Saint</i>	W
Jeremiah 15:10 (11-15) 16-21	Ps 69:1-16	Ps 69:17-23 (24-30) 31-38
Ps 59:1-5, 18-20	Hosea 2:14 - 3:5	Ezekiel 37:15-28
Matthew 13:44-46	John 9:1-17	Romans 5:1-11

28 Tuesday G

Jeremiah 14:17-22	Ps 71	Ps 119:65-88
Ps 79:8-13	Hosea 2:1-13	Ezekiel 37:1-14
Matthew 13:36-43	John 8:48-59	Romans 4:13-25

27 Monday G

Jeremiah 13:1-11	Ps 68:1-20	Ps 68 (21-23) 24-35
Ps 78:55-63	Hosea 1	Ezekiel 36:16-21) 22-38
Matthew 13:31-35	John 8:31-47	Romans 4:1-12

Grievances and forgiveness

by Bruce Everett

I've been reflecting upon the impact of this COVID-19 pandemic upon the feelings associated with loss. Loss of certainty (and its partner, fear); loss of freedom (and our various reactions to compliance); loss of purpose and a sense of hope for the future. As people who like to control our own destiny, the loss of control is particularly galling as we feel that things are being done to us and not by us. We are confused, sad and angry and, at least in Australia with the second wave of infections, we are moving from a sense of being 'all in this together' to blaming those who have not 'done the right thing' in other states, communities or governments.

Our reactions to this sense of loss have paralleled the Kübler-Ross model, or the Five Stages of Grief, which follows the ups and downs of emotions experienced by terminally ill patients prior to death, or people who have lost a loved one. These five stages are typically denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, ultimately acceptance. As Kubler-Ross and David Kessler observe, these stages are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling, but they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. As we've seen with the first and now second wave of COVID-19, these emotions can start all over again with new circumstances and triggers. Nowadays, we are more aware of the mental health issues arising from these feelings and we are encouraged to surround ourselves with loved ones, to have faith, take time off from regular responsibilities, and have good self-care. When we can, we are learning to re-evaluate our values and priorities, and discovering the 'silver lining in the cloud' in our greater appreciation for health care workers, teachers, our local communities and our families. However, as Marguerite Yourcenar says in her book *Alexis* "Suffering turns us into egotists, for it absorbs us completely: it is later, in the form of memory, that it teaches us compassion." It is hard to see meaning in loss or grief or suffering, when you are in the midst of it.

Yet, finding meaning in this time of COVID-19 will be important. Perhaps we won't be able to answer the question 'why did this happen'? Perhaps we will still feel 'why has this been done to me'? However, if one of our greatest freedoms is how we react to things, then we will be able to reflect upon our own reactions to these stressful times. Did it bring out the best in us or in our society? Did it shine a new light on our purpose and what gives our lives meaning? Did it reveal things about ourselves or our society which we are less keen to see brought to light? Some of the greatest wisdom has come from those who experienced unspeakable trauma and harm. World War II holocaust survivor and respected psychiatrist Viktor Frankl offered guidance for anyone who suffers in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. "The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it...Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you."

David Kessler has recently documented a sixth stage of grief, which is Finding Meaning. Many people talk about finding 'closure' after a loss, but Kessler talks about learning to remember those who have died with more love than pain and learning to move forward in a way that honours our loved ones. In finding closure on the feelings associated with this time of COVID-19, will we seek meaning in work, love and courage? We will hold onto the grief and grievances associated with a sense of loss or do, as Dr Fred Luskin encourages in his forgiveness therapy work, hold onto our

past grudges at the expense of our present happiness? As he says, “you can choose, just because the world has been crappy to you, it doesn’t mean you have to be crappy back.”

Optimists say that ‘from adversity springs opportunity and growth’. This COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to reflect upon who we are; what we value and believe; and where we find meaning in our lives. Perhaps not now while we are in the middle of the storm, but in time we will find compassion for this stressful period of our lives and for our reactions to it. We will know that we coped as well as we could and with courage, just as we learnt about ourselves in the process. We will move forward, accepting the losses and anticipating a better future in so many different ways. We will be able to say that ‘this too shall pass’ and that we have passed the test in a time of crisis.

What God Hopes For

Texts: Genesis 28.10-19a; Psalm 139.1-12, 23-24; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Today I want to talk to you about HOPE. Not the hopes of human beings, or even of Christians in particular, but the hopes of God. God’s own hopes are expressed rather well by the apostle Paul, I think:

. . . the creation was subjected to futility, not by its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in HOPE that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God . . . Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

According to Paul, God made the kind of world we have – a world filled with futility and decay – in the hope that the creation itself might one day transcend all of that and embrace what he calls ‘the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ - by which he means that we might all come to share in the joy of God’s life and being in the way that Jesus did. For Paul, you see, Jesus was the first of many children, a human being who submitted himself absolutely to the sadness and despair of the world in order to show that there was a way through to something far better, namely a joyful reconciliation with our creator. In that sense, Jesus is our trail-blazer. God hopes that all of us will embrace the choices Jesus embraced, so trusting his vision and his Father’s care, that we might also come to share in his inheritance as the divine Son of God. God hopes that we might all become divine children like Jesus or, to put it another way, God made us caterpillars in the hope that we might one day become sick of looking at the ground, and so cleave to Christ as he passes from death to life, that we should become butterflies instead.

But note this, friends, that hoping for something is not the same as seeing it happen. In fact, it is quite the opposite. We hope for things precisely because those things are not entirely present to our experience right now. And so hope is always accompanied by a kind of affliction, the affliction of longing for something that has not entirely arrived. Hope then, can be rather tortuous. The contrast between where we are and where we would like to be can be so painful that we cry out with frustration, longing, and anger. Some see Christians who are not content with the present reality as pessimists, ‘glass half empty’ people. But nothing could be further from the truth because, it is only those who have a clear vision and hope for that which has not yet arrived who have a legitimate basis for critiquing what already is, the ‘status quo’ if you like. Of course, the contrast between hope and reality is very difficult to bear sometimes. There is a constant

temptation for God's people to abandon their engagement with hope in order to escape the pain of that contrast. But Paul says that it is not only ourselves but the whole creation which cries out in the pains of labour, longing for the freedom of the children of God to be revealed. In another place he talks of being in the pangs of labour that Christ might be born in the hearts of his people. And so I have come to see that all who suffer because of their commitment to hope bear in their body the scars of the Christ who has gone before us, the Christ who endured the cross in order to bear witness to his vision of a world renewed in love, peace, and justice for all. Thus, it is only those with hope for a new world who really care about the world as it already is.

In that connection, consider this other implication of Christ's suffering: that it is not only ourselves who hope but do not see, it is not only we human beings who cry out with longing for a reality not yet present. First and foremost it is God. For Christ is God incarnate. In Christ, God longs more deeply than any of us. Thus, it is the longing of God, revealed in Christ Jesus, that actually provides the foundation and impetus for human hope. In the context of this longing, the cross of Christ is not simply a dying for the sins of the world. It is also the sign of God's willingness to be immersed in the futility of things as they now are. It is the sign that God is with us in longing for a better world. It is the sign of God's passionate love for all who suffer because the world is not yet what it may be. It is the sign of Immanuel: God with us, in our present, for the sake of a promised future that will renew the world in peace, love and justice.

To all who are chosen by God to share in this longing, the dream of Jacob at Bethel becomes a treasured source of inspiration. For here is one of the most radiant fruits of faithful prayer: a vision in which ordinary things are transformed into extraordinary things. Where places apparently empty of God become places where the angels ascend and descend in a never-ending dance; where stones and grass and sky become the courts of divine presence; where wind and water become the whispering of God's promise. I remember praying in the bush once, in a place now called Fortescue Bay in South-east Tasmania. At the time I was particularly conscious that the Aboriginal traditions which had once inhabited that part of Tasmania were no longer alive. Colonisation had all but wiped them out, so that there are now very few of us who can recall their significance. But while I prayed, while I lamented the fact, the bush seemed to come alive with presence. I could hear the crackle of campfires, and the songs of children, and the splash of women diving for abalone. It was like a message from God which said, 'the Spirit of life has not finished hoping for your dead people and their traditions: there will yet be a resurrection in which all that has been lost will be recovered'. In the dream of Jacob, and in many other dreams, God encounters all who are lost and lamenting, and offers them the chance to find themselves anew by becoming emissaries of blessing for all the world – carriers, like the seed of Jacob, Israel, of promise and of hope not only for themselves, but for all people.

Friends, in a world such as ours, it is easy to lose hope. It is easy to numb ourselves against the scandals of poverty, injustice and greed, and pretend that there is nothing we can do. But hear this. When *we* lose hope, *God* does not. God continues in hope for a creation renewed in the power of the resurrection. God continues to hope that we may share that longing, and be transformed ourselves, as Christ was transformed. God, you see, is extremely patient in hope. Matthew's parable of the weeds and the tares tells us that God persists in the belief that no matter how many evils may grow in the world, or in the souls of women and men, that these evils will never have the power to finally overrun all that is good and true and beautiful. In the end it is God, and not death and evil, who will prevail.

Garry Deverell

Mysteries of the Kingdom

Genesis 25. 19-34; Psalm 119.105-112; Romans 8.1-11; Matthew 13.1-23

In the beginning, people saw things clearly in Palestine. There were a chosen few who were born to wealth and privilege, while thousands of others were born to sweat and be hungry and die in childbirth. There were the godly citizens who knew and obeyed the law of Moses to the tee, tithing even the herbs from their garden because they believed God had commanded it. And there were the godless citizens who were estranged from God because of the sheer impossibility of their obeying the law—the widow without family to care for her, who sold her body to survive, and so could never aspire to the cultic cleanliness required by the law; the landless peasant, who struggled under the weight of Roman taxation, who had literally nothing of value to tithe at the temple; the slaves, whose bodies belonged to the ruling classes, who must do as they are told, even if so doing contradicted God's command; the demoniacs and lepers, haunted by the evils of colonial rule, rendered godless by their manifestation of all these injustices. In the beginning, people saw things clearly in Palestine. There were those who were wealthy enough to be godly if they wanted to, and there were those who were so poor that godliness was not even an option. Apparently, God had made it so.

But then there came a man who took away their sight. He spoke to them in parables, strange, subversive stories in which all they had come to believe and rely on was questioned, changed and transformed from the bottom up. He told them of a sower sowing seed in a field. Some of the seed fell on a path, where the birds came to eat it before it could take root. Some seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was scarce. It sprang up quickly but died for lack of room to put out roots. Other seeds fell amongst thorns which choked the young plants as they grew. But the seeds that fell on good soil grew well, bringing forth a huge harvest. On hearing the story, people felt a shiver down their spines. The rich and the godly felt a shiver of fear. The poor and the godless felt a shiver of hope. The shiver was an invitation to change, to abandon the old way of seeing and embrace the new. Sadly, most of the folk who experienced that shiver walked away. Such change seemed either too much to hope for or threatening to the very core. They returned to the way their lives had always been, to their habitual way of seeing. It seemed safer. But some folk, a small few, felt the shiver and knew it to be divine. They spent time with the Parabler, the teller of stories, and learned the secret of his vision. They left everything, weather wealth or poverty, and followed him around the countryside. Slowly but surely, that shiver did its work. Their hearts became the good soil in the parable. Slowly they became people in whom the reign of God could grow.

Many years after, the Parabler became himself a parable. In the hands of St Paul, he became a story which sent shivers down the spine of all who heard it. A story about finding life in the midst of death and acceptance in the midst of rejection. In the hands of St Paul, the Parabler became a story which caused Jews to stumble and was sheer nonsense to almost everyone else. Why? Because he invited the hearer to change, to put off the old way and take on the new. He invited the hearer to let go of all she or he thought they knew and embrace an enigma, a secret, a mystery from God that could change the world as we know it.

Now, you will often hear people say that the telling of parables were Jesus way of making complex things simple enough for almost anyone to understand. You will sometimes hear people complaining about preachers and theologians who so complicate the simple gospel that few can understand it. 'Why don't they just tell simple stories, stories, like Jesus told', they say, 'then everyone could understand and the gospel would not be so mysterious'. Unfortunately, that is not

what parables do at all – not in the ministry of Jesus, nor in the ministry of the church. Let me quote to you the bit of the gospel that the lectionary left out this morning:

Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

“You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

Parables, Matthew tells us in the bit which the lectionary leaves out, are stories which convey the **secret** of the kingdom of heaven. The word *secret*, in Greek, is *mysterion*, mystery: an enigma or ‘dark interval’ which evades understanding. While Matthew wants us to divide humanity into those who understand the parables and those who do not, is there not a sense in which the word of God persists in its mysteriousness, as much for those *within* the circle of faith as for those without?

If that is the case, then it may be that the meaning of Jesus’ preaching has eluded many who claim that the parables are simple stories with simple meanings. In the light of this I am troubled by those who, for example, would like to reduce the meaning of *this* parable to a description of those who are ‘in’ the community of faith and those who are ‘out’. In fact, each of us comprise both the bad and the good soil. Each of us are, at different times in our lives, both receptive and non-receptive to the gift of the kingdom. I, myself, sometimes lose faith and hope when I see the power of radical evil, in the Sudan, in Palestine or in Washington. I myself lose faith and hope in God when troubles come along, or when people patronise me because I am a Christian. I myself lose faith and hope because of that drive to be socially and financially ‘successful’. I myself am subject to all these things. So the certainty of some about those who are in and those who are out is not a certainty I can share.

Perhaps, in such re-telling of the sower parable, some preachers do not give enough attention to something else which Jesus said (and, again, we find this in the part which the lectionary leaves out). Jesus also said, and Matthew reports this, that the understanding of the *mysterion* is a gift, which in Greek is *dedotai*, donation. Now, if even our capacity to understand God’s word is a gift, then who can boast? Who can thank God that their heart comprises good soil, while another’s does not? And who, in the end, can know who is in and who is out? Who can know if they’ve really grasped the mystery of the kingdom?

Now that, that little detail, preserves for me the original subversiveness of the parable and the Parabler. That little detail, that the word of God is a gift which ever remains a gift, reminds me that what I see and what I know of God and his ways are mine not because of my status and history in the community of faith, but by virtue of God's love and grace alone. There is no reason, therefore, for me to look upon myself as either an insider or an outsider. All who know something of God's love and liberation, whatever their status in terms of spiritual affiliation or godliness, do so because of God's grace. No more. No less. Grace is the great leveller, the great parabolic subverter of status, even and especially within the realm of the Spirit. Friends, if we could grasp **that**, then we would also have grasped that there is nothing to grasp. For it is only by letting go of all we know, only by relinquishing that tribal need to define who is in and who is out, that any of us shall, in the end, show forth a kingdom which is from God. In the end, that is all that is clear to me. But it is enough.

Garry Deverell