

"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live"

A powerful invitation through the words now contained in the book of the prophet Isaiah, one of the most treasured oracles in the Old Testament, and sometimes in Christian circles referred to as the fifth Gospel. Yet the book of Isaiah is now recognised by most scholars to be the work of other unknown writers living at least a century after Isaiah ben Amoz, who gave us chapters one to thirty-nine before the exile, and gave his name to the whole book. Our passage is part of what is often known as Second Isaiah being chapters forty to fifty-five, and written in Babylon during the exile.

It's the section that contains the four Servant Songs which the church has found so influential in interpreting the life and work of Jesus.

And it closes with this incredible promise of an everlasting covenant, born out of God's steadfast love, not just for his chosen people, but for nations they don't even know. And just as the rain comes to water the earth "giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater" so will God's word, his creative intention, accomplish the purpose for which God sends it. And that continued fertility, that fecundity, of new growth bursting out again and again in nature and in culture will be an everlasting sign for those with eyes to see.

So full of such diverse and compelling images, that challenge the imagination, and uplift the spirit, that even the trees of the field will clap their hands and the mountains, the whole of creation, sing for joy!

The widely esteemed Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has described the overarching unity of the whole narrative as "a continued meditation on the destiny of Jerusalem" if not the whole of creation, or so it seems to me.

And it's from the third section of this book that Jesus drew the manifesto for his mission when he read from the scroll in the Nazareth synagogue, but in our passage from Matthew he is quoting from Isaiah chapter six, words from Isaiah's vision in the temple.

Like the people in Isaiah's day those in Jesus' day had heard the teaching of the rabbis, most knew the Law and the Prophets by heart but seem to have had as little meaning to them as say a familiar nursery rhyme in our day, or words which once would have been regarded as blasphemous or coarse expletives have now become so devoid of their original meaning as to become meaningless filler words used just for emphasis.

But let's go back to our passage from Matthew.

It starts with this delightful scene of Jesus relaxing on the beach, watching the fishermen clean their nets, and before long there's a crowd gathering, and maybe a few folk stopped to talk, to ask him questions. Maybe some people come to buy fish; maybe some of the crowd from the house where he had been teaching earlier in the day. If you've sat on the beach on Days Bay or Oriental Parade, or stopped to chat on the esplanade, you can easily imagine yourself in that scene.

Anyway, as the crowd began to grow, Jesus realises that to be better heard he could do that best by climbing into one of the fishing boats pulled up on the shore, so he asks one of the men to push his boat off the shore a little and Jesus settles himself in the bow, and begins to

speaking. "Listen" he says and he starts telling them a little story of a rural scene they all know well " A sower went out to sow. . ."

and we also know it well, very well! We've heard dozens of sermons about it but what we heard today was not the reading set down for a few weeks ago, - the parable of the Sower, and the later explanation given to the disciples, but the bit in between. The bit left out by those who composed the lectionary.

I was so intrigued by the first few lines of the bit left out that I decided to reflect more deeply on the disciples question, which by the way, wasn't "What does the story of the sower mean?"

but "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

Why not some good straight down-to-earth teaching like John the Baptist? Why do you tell them stories?

Matthew records that after getting into the boat Jesus told the gathered listeners many things, but always in parables. Many things. Many parables, but Matthew only records the one. What point was he trying to make? So many questions about such a well-known story.

At first glance, by quoting that familiar passage from Isaiah it sounds as though Jesus is suggesting that those in the crowds that gather around him have lost the capacity to understand good teaching so what's the point.

But that's so out of step with other pictures we have of Jesus. Each of the first three Gospel writers note occasions when Jesus was moved by compassion.. In the next chapter of Matthew, when Jesus had gone by boat to a solitary place for some peace and quiet, yet the crowds followed him on foot, he had compassion on them.

In Mark, again he saw the crowds and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd

And in Luke, when he saw a widow, whose only son, and source of livelyhood had just died, his heart went out to her. "Don't cry" he said, and he raised him and gave him back to his mother.

These are just random examples of the consistent compassion which infuses so many of the stories of Jesus' teaching and healing ministry.

Rather than repeat teaching they had heard from their childhood, Jesus tells simple stories; memorable stories; stories drawn from the every-day life they knew so well; stories that contain the message he wishes to convey. His stories are like the seed in this parable which Matthew uses to illustrate the point.

Unlike other rabbis who saved their deepest teaching for the best of the best, Jesus casts his life bearing parable seeds far and wide.

You see the important point about story is that it grabs your attention; sparks your imagination; leads you to insights you hadn't seen before.

Isn't that why we love to hear stories drawn from life, real or imagined?

They sit with us and stay with us and continue to bear fruit in our thinking.

A commentator following a similar line of thinking said this

"the focus of the parable of the sower could be on those who are good soil, but it is far more powerful to focus on God, as so hopefully in love with all of us that God extravagantly sows

seed everywhere – behind the nightclub dumpsters, in the smelly landfills, on the plastic strewn sea shores – wherever there might be someone passing by. Our hope is in such a God who refuses to be limited to sowing where the investment possibilities are most promising.”  
I’ll say that last bit again -

“ Our hope is in such a God who refuses to be limited to sowing where the investment possibilities are most promising.”

Jesus asks us always to keep in mind Luke’s trilogy of redemption -

The lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son, not from the perspective of the one who is lost, but to be the sower, or the Samaritan, and live out in our own context that deep compassion of Jesus for the least, and the lost, the last and the lonely

“Come,” says Isaiah, “Come to the waters, you who are thirsty”

“Listen, so that you may live”

And Jesus says that the reason he speaks in parables is because although they see, they don’t perceive, and although they hear they don’t understand.

And St Francis said “Preach the gospel at all times and where necessary use word”

And the young women in the psychiatric ward said to the church visitor

“Don’t tell me God loves. You show me that you love me and I’ll make up my own mind about God”

In a day when the ordinary stresses and strains of life are multiplied by a totally uncontainable and unpredictable virus, and no-one really knows what the future might hold, and when it’s increasingly difficult to discern reliable news from fake news, even reliable pictures from CGI, it would be very easy to succumb to the picture painted by the prophets of doom. It’s just at those time we can take hope and comfort from the word of God through Isaiah.

“My word shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it”

Look for the buds of hope, the signs of the presence of the Spirit at work in the world;  
Trust the truths you have based your life on.

And continue to tell the stories of faith in words and images this generation can hear and understand.

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**The three De Beers** *(copyright Diane Gilliam-Weeks, used with permission)*

Once upon a time there were three De Beers, this wealthy Dutch family spent the school holidays skiing round Wanaka and couldn’t forget the place. When their mum died daddy De Beer brought the two little De Beers over to Lake Hawea to live. They loved the fresh mountain breeze, and the warm way the sun reflected on the lake.

Daddy de Beer spent most of his fortune on property for the future benefit of the two baby De Beers...Chantelle and Caspar. He’d promised each of them a lake front property to build on when they old enough. Of course, as you can guess the market boomed and property values rocketed up.

Because his children were the apples of his eye, daddy De Beer devoted his life to their happiness and never remarried. And so it seemed like the end of the world to him, when at 16, Chantelle quit school and demanded her dad hand over her property right there and then.

He was conflicted. He knew he could say no, but daddy De Beer didn't want Chantelle to think his love or his generosity or his promises were conditional he signed over rights to the property to her.

The very next day, she sold the property for half a million dollars, and flew off to France with her boyfriend, Jake.

Daddy De Beer was devastated. Chantelle's brother Caspar was furious and swore he'd never forgive her for hurting their father so badly.

Chantelle on the other hand bought a chic apartment in Paris and the most gorgeous clothes. She and Jake went clubbing every night of the week and slept every day till 1 or two in the afternoon. They were having the time of their lives until the money ran out and Jake ran off.

Chantelle was too scared to ring her dad for help. She couldn't face what she thought he'd say and how angry he'd be. So she took the only job she could get - washing dishes in a café . And she tried to keep the flat . . . but couldn't afford it on a kitchen hand's wages. Each night she'd hit the clubs hoping she could spend the night with a friend, but she was too tired to enjoy it after working all day.

She took some drugs to stay up and others to stop the pain the loneliness. She stayed with strangers just for the warmth and sometimes they gave her money. Gradually she got so worn out and dazed she couldn't work...

She tried busking but her throat hurt. She had no money, no food, and no friends. All she could do was beg a café to give her their left-over food from a bucket meant for a pig farm. Hours later they found her unconscious and called an ambulance.

24 hours later she sighed and tried to open her eyes. She had no idea where she was...when she tried to move she felt sick...her head hurt...she felt a wave of shame and despair wash over her...she tried to cry out but was too weak...but there was something else...someone else in the room...someone holding her hand...in the silence...

someone who'd dropped everything and hired a plane to Christchurch. Ran to catch the flight to Auckland, strained to see the lights of Orly as the plane landed in France. Sprinted to the taxi, and wept with joy, just to touch his baby girl again.

Slowly in the dim light she noticed the balloons and the flowers and the banner which her Dad had saved for when she finally came home...

as her eyes filled with tears but before she could speak her daddy whispered...Don't say anything ...you're worth it.