

REFLECTION 29 OCTOBER 2023

By Tony Pears

JESUS AND PAUL

The title of today's service is Seeds of Peace. It brings to mind the parable of the sower and the seeds where Jesus talks about seed falling on a variety of ground and flourishing or not accordingly.

The peace the world needs and has always needed is no ordinary peace. It is peace grounded in love. And grounded in a love which is no ordinary love.

Let's go back to the Bible readings. They are two of the readings set down in the Revised Common Lectionary for today. But I put the Gospel reading first because that fits the sequence I want to talk about – Jesus, then Paul.

In the Gospel Jesus answers the Pharisees question about which is the greatest commandment by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5. Everett Fox translates that verse from the Hebrew scriptures as follows: "Now you are to love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your substance."

Then in naming the second most important commandment Jesus quotes part of a verse from Leviticus.

I think it is important to reference the whole of that verse from Leviticus, especially in light of what is happening in the world right now.

It reads:

You are not to take vengeance, you are not to retain-anger against the sons of your kin-people but be-loving to your neighbour as one like yourself.

Everett Fox hyphenates the words be loving to try and capture the essence of the Hebrew meaning.

The ground of the books of the law in the Hebrew scriptures lies in the human aspiration to wholeness and perfection. That's the trouble with having gods, there's an irresistible human urge to aspire to be like them, or at least imagine what that would be like. We seem to be stuck with that. The Pharisees are in that tradition.

Someone has written a book titled "Jesus the Pharisee". I haven't read the book, but I certainly think that Jesus may have been more closely associated with the Pharisees than is popularly imagined.

Perhaps only someone who had felt close to them would criticise them so vehemently. And in our gospel reading he outplays them at their own game of questioning him.

As for Paul, he had certainly been a Pharisee, he is quoted as saying so himself.

But both Jesus and Paul came to understand the aspiration to be like God differently.

We don't have a biography of the formative years of Jesus's life but he seems to have been on a learning curve the whole of his life – leading to the cross.

But the seed from his death falls on the fertile ground of Paul's heart.

Perhaps when Paul assisted at the stoning of Stephen, a follower of Jesus, his heart perceived a passion and commitment in Stephen that was actually akin to his own aspiration. Fertile ground.

And what becomes of that seed? What is its fruit? Well Paul seems to have been on a learning curve too. There seem to be years of his life after his conversion that we know very little about.

That takes us to the second reading.

1st Thessalonians is possibly the earliest written thing in the New Testament. And it is undisputed by scholars that it was written by Paul.

Of course, Paul didn't title his letter the "First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians". The church did that when it assembled and labelled what it chose to put in the New Testament.

Paul simply begins his letter "From Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians". We know Silvanus better by the name Silas.

But the point is, Paul did not work alone.

Now let's hear again Paul's words further on in his letter to the Thessalonians.

"We never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed, nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of god but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

Now who does that sound like?